

interzone/96

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SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

June
1995

**Peter F.
Hamilton**
interviewed

New stories by
Eric Brown
Paul Di Filippo
Alastair Reynolds
and others



She was called so many different names . . . and
that, too, was part of her mask . . .

JULIAN MAY

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Interzone
217 Preston Drive, Brighton BN1 6FL,
United Kingdom.

All subscriptions, back-issue orders,
general correspondence, books for
review, and enquiries about advertising
should be sent to this address.

Subscriptions:

£28 for one year (12 issues) in the UK.

Cheques or postal orders should be
crossed and made payable to *Interzone*.
Overseas subscriptions are £34, payable
by International Money Order.

Payments may also be made by Access
or Visa card (also MasterCard or
Eurocard): please send your
cardholder's name, initials and address
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will be charged at the £ sterling rate.)

U.S. subscribers may pay by dollar
check \$52 by Air Saver (accelerated
surface mail).

Lifetime subscriptions:

£280 (UK); £340 (overseas);

\$520 (U.S., accelerated surface mail).

Back-issues

of *Interzone* are available at £2.50 each
in the UK

(£2.80 each overseas), postage included.
(US dollar price: \$5 Air Saver.)

All issues are in print except numbers
1-2, 4-8, 12, 15-18, 20-24.

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interzone

SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

No 96

June 1995

CONTENTS

Fiction

6 ERIC BROWN A Prayer for the Dead

Illustrations by Noel Bateman



21 PAUL DI FILIPPO Big Eater

32 STEPHEN BOWKETT The Gift

39 NEIL JONES Time-Travel Blues

46 ALASTAIR REYNOLDS Byrd Land Six

Illustrations by Russell Morgan



Features

4 INTERACTION Readers' Letters

28 PETER F. HAMILTON interviewed by James Lovegrove



36 NICK LOWE Mutant Popcorn Film Reviews



45 DAVID LANGFORD Ansible Link

58 PAUL MCAULEY, BRIAN STABLEFORD, CHRIS GILMORE, AND JAMES LOVEGROVE Book Reviews

Cover by Santos Garijo

Published monthly. All material is © *Interzone*, 1995, on behalf of the various contributors

ISSN 0264-3596

Printed by KP Litho Ltd, Brighton

Trade distribution: Diamond Magazine Distribution Ltd.,

Unit 1, Burgess Rd., Ivyhouse Lane, Hastings,
E. Sussex TN35 4NR (tel. 01424 430422).

Bookshop distribution: Central Books,
99 Wallis Rd., London E9 5LN (tel. 0181 986 4854).

Funded by
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Interface

In the February issue we asked readers to vote on their favourite (and least favourite) stories published in the magazine during 1994. Fifty-six ballots were received by the deadline, a quite sufficient number to give a valid result (thank you, everyone). As before, we subtracted all negative mentions from positive ones to arrive at the following scores. The total number of stories published last year was 64; but to save space, and embarrassment for some, we list just the top 40 or so stories here.

Story Poll Results, 1994

1)	G. Joyce & P. Hamilton:	
	Eat Reecebread	23
2)	Molly Brown: Women on the Brink...	22
3=)	Paul Di Filippo: The Double Felix	21
3=)	John Meaney: Sharp Tang	21
5)	Greg Egan: Our Lady of Chernobyl	20
6=)	Barrington J. Bayley:	
	Gnostic Endings	18
6=)	Gary Kilworth: Wayang Kulit	18
6=)	Geoff Ryman: Fan	18
9)	Ben Jeapes: The Data Class	16
10=)	Eric Brown: Downtime in the MKCR	14
10=)	Geoff Ryman: Dead Space	
	for the Unexpected	14
12)	Ben Jeapes: Giantkiller	13
13=)	Thomas M. Disch:	
	The Man Who Read a Book	12
13=)	Lawrence Dyer: Slugs and Snails...	12
13=)	Katharine Kerr: Asylum	12
16=)	Stephen Baxter: Mittelwelt	11
16=)	Keith Brooke: Professionals	11
16=)	Robert Holdstock: Merlin's Wood	11
19=)	John Gribbin: The Alice Encounter	10
19=)	Stuart Palmer: Get Hot and Dance!	10
21=)	Mary Gentle: Human Waste	9
21=)	Paul Park: The Tourist	9
21=)	Brian Stableford: The Bad Seed	9
24=)	Stuart Falconer:	
	Fugue and Variations	8
24=)	Thomas Marcinko: Whiter Teeth...	8
24=)	Nicholas Royle: Off	8
24=)	Brian Stableford: Changelings	8
28=)	Timons Esaiias:	
	Changing of the Guard	7
28=)	Keith Brooke: Easy Never Pays	7
28=)	Peter Friend & Li Cross: Vain	7
28=)	Leigh Kennedy: Golden Swan	7
28=)	Sean McMullen: Ring of Green Fire	7
28=)	Darrell Schweitzer:	
	On the Last Night...	7
34=)	Jack Deighton: Closing Time	6
34=)	John Meaney: Parallax Transform	6
36=)	Keith Brooke: Westward	5
36=)	Peter T. Garratt:	
	The Collectivization of Transylvania	5
36=)	Gary M. Gibson:	
	Touched By an Angel	5
36=)	Brian Stableford:	
	Unkindness of Ravens	5
40=)	Sarah Ash: Airs from Another Planet	4
40=)	Barrington J. Bayley: On the Ledge	4
40=)	Julian Flood:	
	Meditations of the Heart	4

The remaining 22 stories all scored fewer than four points, with a couple from issue 88 (the *Nexus* number) ending up with -20. As you can see, there was no runaway winner this year,

with Graham Joyce and Peter F. Hamilton's "Eat Reecebread" and Molly Brown's "Women on the Brink" just squeaking past Paul Di Filippo's "The Double Felix," John Meaney's "Sharp Tang" and Greg Egan's "Our Lady of Chernobyl" to take first and second places in a very close-run race. Our congratulations to these six authors on doing so well. But remember, this is a mere racing contest (so to speak) – not a definitive measure of literary worth!

Art & Non-Fiction Poll Results

In the following categories, we list only those who scored four or more points. Congratulations to poll-toppers **Jim Burns** and **Gerry Grace** (for exterior and interior art, respectively – again) and **David Langford** (for non-fiction – yet again!).

Artists – Covers:

1)	Jim Burns (#79)	26
2)	Geoff Taylor (#84)	18
3)	Geoff Taylor (#90)	16
4)	Jim Burns (#82)	15
5)	Martin McKenna (#81)	14
6)	Danny Flynn (#83)	12
7)	David A. Hardy (#85)	7

Artists – Interiors:

1)	Gerry Grace	30
2)	SMS	24
3)	Nick Patrick	5
4)	Rob Mooney	4

Non-Fiction:

1)	David Langford:	
	Ansible Link	27
2)	Book reviews in general	19
3)	Charles Platt:	
	comment columns	16
4)	Nick Lowe: Mutant Popcorn	15
5=)	John Gribbin interview	
	(Melia)	12
5=)	Christopher Priest:	
	Out of the Temple	12
7=)	Interaction (readers' letters)	10
7=)	Terry Pratchett interview	
	(Hargreaves)	10
9=)	Iain Banks interview	
	(Nicholls)	9
9=)	Jim Burns interview (Melia)	9
9=)	Tom Shippey: America in SF	9
12=)	Interviews in general	8
12=)	Jeff Noon interview (Ryman)	8
14=)	Brian Stableford:	
	essays in general	6
14=)	Brian Stableford:	
	On Bram Stoker	6
16=)	David Eddings interview (Nicholls)	5
16=)	Chris Gilmore: Book Reviews	5
16=)	Brian Stableford:	
	On Stanley Weinbaum	5
16=)	Bruce Sterling interview (Concannon)	5
16=)	Ben Bova interview (Nicholls)	4
21=)	John Clute: Book Reviews	4
21=)	Interface (editorials)	4
21=)	Alan Moore interview (Winterton)	4

And that's it for another year.

David Pringle

Dear Editors:

Best wishes for the next few issues. For number 100 I'll be looking forward to: the first short story from Arthur C. Clarke since "A Meeting with Medusa," that elusive Christopher Priest Dream Archipelago story (there must be one), some Ballard, a new and astonishing vision from Greg Egan or Ian McDonald, and a previously undiscovered tale by H. G. Wells or William Hope Hodgson – even if you have to get Brian Stableford to write it!

Gary Dalkin

Bournemouth, Dorset

Editor: Well, we can't promise any Clarke or Priest (though both Arthur and Chris are regular readers of this magazine and will see your remark; so you never know...). But we do indeed have new "astonishing visions" by Greg Egan and Ian McDonald in hand, and are planning "some Ballard" (though not for issue 100 – possibly something to mark his 65th birthday, a little later). As for Wells and Hodgson pastiches, I'm sure Brian Stableford could oblige us at the drop of a hat (and, of course, Steve Baxter already has done something similar) ... but perhaps we shouldn't encourage any more of that sort of thing for the time being.

Dear Editors:

Number 94, the Platt-zone, was by far the most enjoyable issue of *IZ* for a long time. No mean feat either, as the past 12 issues have held some excellent fiction and non-fiction, but this particular theme issue really hit the bullseye for me. Special thanks to David Langford, who had me in stitches, and to Barrington Bayley, whose story had my mind buzzing for days after.

Trevor C. Baker

Stevenage, Herts.

Dear Editors:

Just finished issue 94, and a number of adjectives spring to mind – refreshing, brilliant, excellent, are typical examples. Charles Platt has done a great job in choosing the fiction (ten pieces – wow!), and in commissioning some really effective artwork... I look forward to *IZ* continuing with this kind of quality.

Neil Williamson

Glasgow

Dear Editors:

I welcome the idea of guest editors (*Interzone* 94) as this provides some variety, although I'm afraid that on

Interaction

this occasion the main effect was to remind me how good the magazine usually is. After some reflection I would say that the impression is of a number of people (not all) writing to a theme, and thus out of character, and it didn't work. Here are some specific thoughts:

I didn't really understand Charles Platt's guest editorial. Presumably it was intended as tongue-in-cheek hyperbole, but with a core message. For me, the message got lost.

I admire John Clute and his writings, but this time I just couldn't fight through the clever language to get at the meaning, so I had to pass by his "Looking Back at Books."

Rudy Rucker's "The Loonies Need You" I enjoyed, probably because it was a straightforward story, told straightforwardly, which is what I like. It probably won't inspire me to get the book though.

"Bluebeard" by Piers Anthony was a bit lightweight for two reasons. Firstly it was quite a nice simple idea that was strung out too much, even though it was short. Secondly it was spoiled by the ending — the discussion between husband and wife in which all is revealed in rather bad Agatha Christie style. This is the sort of stylistic device that budding authors are warned against, and a reason why their stories get rejected for publication.

Gregory Benford's "Kollapse" was well-worked, consistent, well-paced, well-characterized. Barry Bayley's "Get out of Here" suffered from similar faults to "Bluebeard" — a core idea, worked for what it's worth (and it was worth something), but the wedge of contrived "explanation" was really a bit shoddy.

As for Andy Oldfield's "Satori..." — same comments as for Benford's "Kollapse." Good!

"Speed Clans" by Richard Kadrey is one of those difficult ones where I don't personally like the style of the story, but can recognize it as well-written nevertheless. I ended up quite enjoying it for the ideas.

I don't in general like stories, particularly short ones, with a lot of jargon in them, so that you have to spend half the time figuring out what half the words mean. This was why I didn't take to Paul Di Filippo's "Distributed Mind," although I'm sure there's a good story in there trying to get out.

Lois Gresh's "Let Me Make You Suffer" was a nasty story well written. What "Bloom" by Michael Blumlein

was about I have no idea, and there is no incentive for me to find out.

Kathleen Ann Goonan's "Sunflowers" was a strong story. Unlike some of the other tales, the core idea was expanded through good characterization. I did get bogged down in the philosophy of it at the end though, and was left rather wondering what it meant.

So there you have the Platt issue. I'm looking forward to the return of the letters page (even if I'm not in it).

Nick Gassman

nick@netwiz.demon.co.uk

Dear Editors:

Issue 94: a new editor, a new layout, text overlaying graphics, graphics interrupting text. I can see the complaints rushing in now — but wait, this isn't Paul Brazier again is it? No, here is the work of Charles Platt, a craftsman who spent his apprenticeship in cramped and damp conditions feverishly working through long nights to prepare each edition for its print run.

This is a body of work assembled in months rather than days, each layout having the benefit of being smoothed to mould to the text, the benefits of compliancy enhancing the actual reading of the story. Here we have what I saw in those first scrabbling efforts of Paul for *Interzone*, here is perhaps what *IZ* will become — *has* become, if we're honest about it. If someone cares to disagree with me perhaps they would care to point out the real differences in layout, apart from the typeface (I actually prefer Paul's to the standard courier/roman typeface). As proof, maybe we should give Paul an equivalent time to construct an issue (although this probably is not feasible).

So what to say about the actual issue? I think I can sum it up in one word really — *gush*. I can't praise the work highly enough. Sure, there were a few stories doomed to be crab meat, but that's just personal taste. For instance on the seaweed fodder scale we have "Bloom" by Michael Blumlein, a personalized name pun perhaps? This senile-dementia stream-of-consciousness prattle led nowhere. For brief moments I thought, unwisely, that Mr Blumlein was about to deal subtly with an issue, e.g. cryogenic preservation, but alas I was wrong: wipeout! Also a bad wave to jump on was "Bluebeard" by Piers Anthony. I admit that I have disliked Anthony's style of writing ever since I unwittingly picked up *Vale of the Vole* in the library.

Yet even putting aside this, all the moral tale could elicit was a bravo for a vain attempt to highlight the potential dangers arising in a new age of virtual reality. Better by far was Gregory Benford's "Kollapse," a quick easy sweep of the cliquishness of cyberspace and the encouragement of nerd-dom. Yep, people, we still need to talk to other human beings to avoid being cut off in some global network backwater hamlet where the fool has been voted town Mayor for the last five years.

So we arrive at the waves that were worth all the paddling to get onto. Rudy Rucker as Rudy Rucker has always been — machines have feelings too. A duplex of old-style cyberpunk tales from the city, in Oldfield's "Satori Must be Something..." and Kadrey's "Speed Clans." Di Filippo's "Distributed Mind" was a real alien viewscape of the future, a vision that swirled with chaotic possibilities and uncertainties, greens and blues of a wave-roller-coaster that unfortunately hit the beach too early. Di Filippo should rewrite this one longer, as it deserves the treatment. Finally, my personal seventh wave of seven waves, "Sunflower" by Kathleen Ann Goonan: ride high at the top of the wave with the hero as a man with nearly all he desires, and then swoop low across the breaking wave into a tube of depression that closes in after the suicide of his wife and child; then break out with the image of a Sunflower and a girl bereft in a similar manner of love and life; to ride high again to the golden shores under the gaze of the Sunflower.

Craig Turner

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Charles Platt replies: *I have seen a number of letters praising my guest-edited issue of Interzone. Naturally, I'm happy about this. I'm less happy, though, about the complaint implied by a couple of writers, "Why can't other issues be like this?" Please bear in mind I had a full year in which to gather material and do design. Also, I exceeded the usual Interzone editorial budget and paid for the extra material myself. Therefore, regardless of whether you loved it or loathed it, "my" issue of Interzone can't be compared directly with other issues.*

One other point: some readers didn't seem to realize that my editorial and John Clute's and David Langford's columns were humorously intended. It was, after all, the April issue.

A PRAYER FOR



ERIC

I made my farewells to the house, moving from room to open-plan room, standing in doorways and viewing in my mind's eye scenes and incidents long gone. The house was grown from Tartarean wildwood, without doors or windows, and admitted the cooling northern breeze, great dancing butterflies and the mingled fragrances from the abundant flowers in the garden. I moved to the verandah and leaned against the rail, staring down across the vale to the shimmering blue lake and, in the distance, the lofty mountains of Mallarmé. Now that the time had come for me to leave the playground of my youth, I felt compelled to stay a while longer, to linger, to bathe in the memories that flooded back like an incoming tide.

Two momentous events occurred that summer 50 years ago, when I was 14 and life seemed a thing of limitless possibilities and boundless hope. I suffered a loss that affects me still, and for the first time I fell in love. So bound together were these incidents in my memory, as I looked back over the years at the

shallow but honest boy I was then, that I could not recall one without being reminded of the other. My childhood was a halcyon period of endless summers, and it was the first time that real tragedy, and inexorable passion, had touched upon my life. The combination of events changed me – for better or for worse, I do not know, but changed me nevertheless – from the starry-eyed youth I was then to the man I am today.

Perhaps the beginning of the end was the first day of my holiday, when my father called me to say that he and my mother wished to speak with me. The summons, via the speaking-pipe beside my bed, awoke me to a brilliant, sunlit morning tempered by the cool breeze from the mountains. My room was a thoroughfare for all manner of iridescent flying insects, and flowers curled their inquisitive heads through the windowholes as if to witness my awakening. I had arrived home the night before from my boarding school in Mallarmé city a thousand kilome-

OR THE DEAD



BROWN

Illustrations by Noel Bateman

tres to the south, and I could think of no greater contrast than between the drab confines of my dormitory and my own room. I had been released from the prison sentence of school – the long months of the holidays seemed to stretch ahead without end – and my room was a symbol of all that was good in life.

After my father's terse summons, I pulled on my shorts and shirt and, my feet bare to the warmth of the wildwood, made my leisurely way down the many stairs to the ground-floor. My parents' possessions – the wooden carvings from Earth, the artwork from around the Thousand Worlds, the Tartarean rugs and tapestries – were familiar from my many summer and winter holidays here in the past, but at the same time new and exotic after the spartan furnishings of my school.

My parents, likewise, seemed to be creatures at once familiar and yet larger than life, like well-loved characters from a much-read novel. I could not say that I knew them well, nor could I claim to have loved them – they seemed to me to be stereotypical

parents, offering safety and succour, and demanding in return only my attention and obedience, a contract that suited me, in my already semi-independent way, very well.

I had spoken only briefly to my father the night before, on the vench-train journey from Mallarmé to the lakeside settlement of Verlaine, and we had not broached the topic of my falling grades. I expected that this was what they wished to speak to me about this morning. I envisaged the dialogue as I knocked upon the arch to the study and entered: my father's demand to know the reason for my lack of success, my usual excuses, my mother's entreaties that I would do better next term, my earnest promises that I would. Already I was eager to be away from the house, to be with my friends in the tree beside the lake. They had been on holiday for the past week – I had been kept back to repeat an exam – and I was impatient to catch up with events, afraid of missing out on shared experiences that would subtly exclude me from the camaraderie of their company.

My father was seated behind his vast desk, a big man with a florid face and curling silver hair: he was cheerful and lenient by nature, only occasionally stipulating bounds that were not to be crossed, and were not. My mother stood before the arch that overlooked the garden and the lake. I had once overheard a guest at a house party describe her as beautiful, which had surprised me at the time, as one never thinks of one's mother as being the object of such attention. She might have been beautiful, but she was also cool and distant. She seemed to me to go through the motions of being a mother, like an inadequate actress playing a part for which she was manifestly unsuited. They were both botanists who had come from Earth to study the flora of Tartarus, fallen in love with the province of Mallarmé and decided to stay.

My mother moved from the arch and perched herself on the corner of the desk, while I sat on the facing chair, my feet dangling inches above the polished timber tiles.

My father tapped something before him, hidden from me by the elevation of the desk. "How much have they taught you at school about the nova?" he asked.

I was surprised and relieved that I was not to receive a lecture. "Well..." I began. "We've studied all about the atomic processes —"

My mother gave a tolerant half-smile. "No," my father said, "I mean *our* nova — the effects it will have on Tartarus?"

I frowned. I failed to see the reason for the question. "We were taught that one day the sun will blow and destroy the planet."

"In one or two hundred years from now?" I nodded. I had never really stopped to think that the beauty I took for granted would one day be no more. To a child of 14, a century or two means the same as a million years.

My father said, "The scientists have revised their estimates. They've noticed increased activity in the sun itself."

He smiled at my expression of blank incomprehension. "The scientists say that the sun will blow not in a hundred years, but in 50 or 60."

Now 50 years is a sum manageable to the mind of a young boy; 50 years was well within the expectancy of my life span, and my father's words touched something deep, and until then unplumbed, within me. I felt a kind of awed appreciation of the fate that would befall Tartarus, my home and all I knew.

Beyond my mother and father, through the arch, I saw a group of kids running down the lane that led to the lake. I made out Gabby and Bobby, Satch and Rona — then I saw the detestable Hulse, whose name seemed to suit him, and saw too that he had his arm about the shoulders of little Leah Reverdy, and that she seemed not at all bothered by this gross imposition — in fact, by her tinkling laugh that reached me on the wind, was rather enjoying his attention. The sudden surge of jealousy I felt then was overtaken by pique that they had not called upon me to join them — then I rationalized that they could not have known that I was home.

I was impatient to join them, to impart the portentous news that *within our lifetimes* Tartarus would be destroyed. It seemed important that I share my discovery with them, so that perhaps I might judge from their reaction how I myself felt about the impending catastrophe.

"The reason we're telling you this," my father continued, "is that we want to know what you would like to do."

I shook my head. "I don't understand."

"You were due to leave school next year," he said, "work a year with us before starting college at Baudelaire."

My mother took over. "If you did that, you might feel... shall I say, emotionally tied to Tartarus? You would be in your 20s before you graduated, and feel less like leaving the planet. By the time you are 50, the evacuations will have begun, and it will be much more wrenching than to leave."

"The alternative," my father interrupted, "is to attend college next year on Earth, break the link with Tartarus now." My mind was in confusion. For so long my future had been certain — study at Mallarmé, then Baudelaire, with frequent visits home — that I could hardly conceive of this new plan.

"No. No, I don't want to leave." I thought of Leah, and the hopeless possibility that one day I might have her as my own — and it seemed that if I left Tartarus next year then my chances, even as slim as they were now, would be nil.

"Perhaps you should have some time to think it over," my mother said. "It's different for your father and I. By the time of the nova, we'll no longer be around."

I could not bring myself to meet her gaze. If I indicated that I understood her I would seem heartless, while if I feigned ignorance I might appear foolish.

"At least you know the situation now," my father said, bringing the subject to a close.

"May I leave now?"

"What about breakfast?" my mother asked.

I told her that I'd grab some fruit on the way down to the lake — berries and citrus were bountiful in the hedges of the lane — and left the room. I could have gone around the desk and through the arch, but I felt that I would be impinging on my parents' territory, and perhaps by doing so provoke more questions. I wanted nothing more than to rendezvous with my friends.

I left the house and sprinted down the track to the tall hollow-tree that over the years we had made our own. So impatient was I to tell my news that I failed to gather my breakfast on the way.

The entrance in the bole of the tree was concealed by ferns, which I brushed aside. Over the years, since first discovering the tree, we had worn the bark of the narrow defile to a lustrous glow with our continual passage back and forth. I slipped easily inside, found the footholds in the darkness and climbed. The tight chimney corkscrewed up the trunk of the tree, and I wondered how Hulse was finding the climb these days. He was a year older than me, and

big for his age. I considered what might happen when he found he could no longer fit through the entrance: he was the nominal leader of our little gang, and knowing him as I did I guessed that he would call the hollow-tree out of bounds, a childish rendezvous anyway, and suggest that we meet at the café on the jetty instead.

My ascent was illuminated by the leaf-filtered sunlight that spilled through the exit hole in the trunk high above. I came to the oval slit, breathing hard, and paused before climbing through. The wide branch thrust from the tree at right angles, and over the centuries a great fungal growth had spread from this branch to the next, creating a triangular platform perhaps ten metres in length. Seated at the far end of this platform, their backs to me and their legs dangling over the edge as they stared down at the lake 50 metres below, were Rona, Gabby, Bobby – and Hulse with his arm around Leah. I looked up to find Satch, and as expected detected his shape through the membrane of the dream-sac suspended from the branch above. For as long as I'd known him, he'd made every excuse to slip away and climb into the parasite plant and hallucinate the hours away.

Now that the time had come to tell my friends about the imminence of the nova, I was overcome with an odd reluctance. Although we all, with the exception of Leah, attended boarding schools in Malariné, these schools were different and we rarely saw each other during term. Only three times a year, during the holidays, did we renew our friendships: always the reunions were fraught and embarrassing affairs, for me at least, as I fought to overcome my shyness and regain the degree of intimacy attained during the last break.

Rona turned and saw me. "It's Joe," she said, waving. She was small and freckled and really quite ugly, but friendly and funny.

Gabby and Bobby both turned and waved in greeting, but, pointedly I thought, Hulse and Leah remained with their backs to me, absorbed in each other.

Forced to make an entry now, I waved and crawled on hands and knees from the tree trunk and across the fungal platform. Rona, Gabby and Bobby joined me and we exchanged the usual stilted greetings. We chattered about the past term, and I made a joke of my poor grades, only to be matched by Bobby who had failed all his major subjects and would be kept down next term. Of all of them, Bobby was my best friend, the one with whom the gap of months between meetings seemed like mere hours. He and Gabby were brother and sister, both tall and blindingly blonde, but whereas Gabby was all laughs and chatter, Bobby was quiet and self-absorbed, perhaps even a little slow.

Gabby grabbed my hand to silence me, opened her eyes wide and leaned forward. She was about to divulge a secret, and I sensed that Rona and Bobby were far from happy.

"Joe," said Gabby, prolonging the suspense, "guess what?"

"What?" I laughed, looking from Bobby to Rona.

"Gabby..." Bobby protested.

Gabby threw back her blonde head and laughed. "Rona and my brother," she declared in a primly theatrical voice, "are lovers!"

Oddly, it was me who reddened. The couple in question just looked at each other with that quiet complaisant smile of all newly joined couples.

Bobby then elbowed his sister in the ribs. "And who does it in the sac with Satch?"

Gabby bit her bottom lip and frowned up at where the dream-sac hung heavy with Satch's weight above us. "Well, where else can we do it? He never comes out of there!"

Rona clasped her hands over her heart. "Can you even imagine it? Gabby and Satch in love!"

"It's not love," Gabby said with a frankness beyond her years, "just lust. How could I love someone who's always so high?"

Rona, perhaps to make me feel less left out of the pairing off that had gone on in my absence, took my hand and hauled me to the edge of the fungal patio. "Just look at the view, Joe! I swear it gets better every year."

We sat side by side, our legs dangling over the edge, and stared out across the lake. We were perhaps a hundred metres above the scintillating blue expanse, and the aerial view of the long body of water wedged between the gentle green hills made me think, as always, that I must surely live in the most beautiful region on all Tartarus. In the middle of the lake was the Zillion's island, but there was no sign of the creature today.

"Joe bombed and had to resit his maths exam," Gabby told Hulse and Leah.

Hulse just grunted. "You never could count, kid," he said.

Beyond him, Leah leaned forwards, like a queen in a hand of cards. She pushed her lips to the side of her face in a *too-bad* grimace that sent my heart pounding. "Hi, Joe," she said, lazy and laconic, and in the same way waved her fingers at me, minimally.

I had purposefully not looked Leah's way until now: I could no more acknowledge her liaison with Hulse than I could have faced the possibility that she might snub me. She was the youngest among our group, at least in terms of years, though she had about her the natural sophistication of a woman twice her age. I had worshipped her from afar since I was ten, and just a year ago a miracle occurred when she became Gabby's best friend and, in consequence, a member of our gang.

Not long after that she took up with Hulse, perhaps impressed by his bravado, his leadership skills; I should have hated her for it, but I could only feel sorry for her and wait until the day when she saw through his swaggering act.

She was as slim as a moonfern, brown as a coffee bean. When alone in her company I was almost always speechless. On one embarrassing occasion, which she either did not notice, or deigned to overlook, she had playfully grabbed my arm and asked me a question, and in a paroxysm of fright and

delight I had lost control of my bladder.

I recalled what I had rushed here to tell them.

"Have you heard about the nova?" I asked in general. "It's due to blow in 50 years."

Hulse turned to me, something like heroic forbearance in his attitude. "When did you find *that* out, kid?"

"Just now. This morning. My father told me."

Hulse flicked a fashionable lock of hair from his eyes. "Just what do they teach you at *your* school?" he sneered at me. How I hated his heavy-featured face, with its expert appropriation, freakish in someone so young, of adult disdain.

I glanced around. Bobby and Rona and Gabby were silent, gazing down at the lake. Leah was concealed behind my tormentor; I could only see her bare legs, embraced by her equally bare, brown arms.

"Nova in 50," Hulse reeled off, "evacuation plans begin in 30, actual evacuation in 40. Citizens to be evacuated by provinces, to designated planets in the Thousand Worlds. Communities to be kept intact, unless individuals wish otherwise, in which case they pay their own way."

I tried to hide my unease, but that was impossible. I had a face that flared as red as a beacon at the slightest perceived affront.

"I had no idea..." I stammered. "Nobody told me." Hulse rolled his wrist in a haughty gesture. "Consider yourself told."

"Are... are any of you leaving before..." I stuttered. "That is, before the actual evacuation?"

Gabby glanced at her brother. "Daddy said he's thinking about taking us back to Earth. But I hope he doesn't."

"I'm leaving anyway when I graduate," Hulse said, "but I expect I'll come back from time to time, for old time's sake."

I cleared my throat. "Leah?"

She leaned forward again, and her smile banished all my self-doubt. "I'm staying here until the evacuation," she said, and I was cheered by the thought that her declaration hinted at her independence from Hulse. "What about you?"

Timorously, I returned her smile. "I'm staying too," I said. "I couldn't imagine living anywhere else." Perhaps boldened by her attention, I went on. "It's hard to believe that in 50 years this... all this..." I gestured in lieu of words.

Rona said in a whisper, "All destroyed in the ultimate firestorm."

"God," Bobby said, as if the thought had just struck him, "Mallarmé, the mountains and the lake... even Baudelaire!"

I glanced across at Leah. Tears filmed her vast, brown eyes.

Hulse said, "Yeah, just think of it. Every last bird and beast burned to a cinder."

I expected Leah to protest, to cry at least. Instead she laughed and hit out at Hulse with a tiny, ineffectual fist. "Oh, you... you typical *man*, Hulse!" and there was something close to admiration in her tone.

I stared down past my feet at the wind-rilled

water far below. A silence settled as we each considered our thoughts, or in Hulse's case whatever passed for thoughts.

I wondered if the holiday would continue in this vein, or if Hulse would let up and treat me as a human being. He'd been affable enough in the past, to the point where I almost considered him a friend, but he had always spoiled himself with some barbed cruelty or malicious act – not always directed at myself. Bobby had been the butt of his arrogance in the past. Perhaps this was one of the reasons Bobby and I were close.

"Talking about birds and beasts," Hulse said, "shall we tell him about the Zillion?"

I glanced around at my friends, but they looked uneasy and would not meet my gaze.

"What about it?" I asked Hulse.

"While you were resitting your exams," he said, "we began a dare."

I guessed what the dare was, and I understood then the unease of my friends. I felt my palms begin to sweat where I gripped the lip of the fungus.

"What kind of dare?"

"On the first day of the holiday, I swam over to the island at sunset, sat and waited until the Zillion came out, then stared him down."

I looked across the lake to the green knoll of the island. In years gone by we had often dared each other to swim across to Zillion's island and confront the creature. At nights, as we huddled around the fire that Hulse had expertly built on bricks carried up from the lane, we had tried to frighten each other with ever more terrible stories about the strange creature that made the tiny island its home. We knew it for a rogue Arcturian gladiator, or a man-eater, or a telepath who could kill with a single thought. My parents laughed when I told them this, and said that he was a harmless alien hermit who had come to Verlaine to see out the rest of his days in peace. But then they *would* say that, I reasoned, to keep the dreadful truth from me.

So Hulse had finally summoned the courage to face the alien... I would have been impressed if I had not disliked him so much.

"What happened?" I asked.

Hulse shrugged nonchalantly. "He just stared at me. I thought I felt a prickling in my head, as if he were trying to read my thoughts. Then he returned to his lair and I swam back."

I stared at the island. It was perhaps a kilometre away. The swim alone would have been enough to tax my strength, but then to confront the alien...

Hulse went on, "Next day, Leah did the same. Then Bobby and Gabby and Rona. Even Satch stirred himself from his sac yesterday and paid the creature a visit."

Hulse was looking at me, sidewise, assessing my reaction to the news. I glanced at my friends. Now I realized the reason for their earlier unease. They knew that I was a poor swimmer, knew I would have difficulty reaching the island.

Like a torturer relishing the agony of his victim,

Hulse let the silence stretch.

"So..." he said at last, "how about this evening at sunset?"

"I..." I cast about feebly for an excuse. "I can't. Not tonight. I said I'd help my mother in the garden."

Hulse's stare combined disbelief with supreme disdain. "But," I went on, surprising myself, "I'm doing nothing the following night. I'll swim over to the island then." And I stared at him until he looked away.

"You all heard that," he said to the others. "Joe'll risk his life tomorrow."

"Don't joke about it, Hulse." This was Leah. She leaned around Hulse and smiled at me. "Don't worry 'bout it, Joe. You know, nothing is ever as bad as you expect it to be."

Shortly after this, the meeting broke up. Gabby stretched and yawned, staring up at Satch in his sac. "You've slept enough, boy. I think I'll go and wake him up."

Quietly, whispering to each other, Hulse and Leah slipped from the platform. I heard them climbing high up inside the trunk, caught a glimpse of Leah's legs as she stepped out onto a more private platform high overhead.

Bobby and Rona were arguing beside the slit in the bole. Finally Rona flounced from view, and Bobby joined me on the edge. "Women!" he complained, shrugging his shoulders. "How about a game of Out?"

He pulled a miniature set from the pocket of his jacket and we sprawled out in the dappled sunlight and played the best of three. My mind was not on the game – a combination of trepidation at what I'd got myself into in agreeing to the swim, and some subtle realisation that Bobby would rather be with

Rona, distracted me. I played badly and lost the first and third games.

I rolled onto my back and stared up through the dancing foliage. Above me, the canoe-shape of the dream-sac swayed and bulged as Gabby and Satch made love.

"What was it like, when you swam across to the island?" I asked Bobby. I could not see him from where I lay, but I sensed his hesitation. I could imagine his reluctant shrug, his slow grimace. "Oh... you know. It's easy, once you're there. Don't worry about it, Joe, okay?"

"It's easy, once you're there," I repeated. "But it's getting there that's giving me the shits. And then I have to stare the bloody Zillion down."

He was silent. I closed my eyes. So much childhood experience is needlessly traumatic: I had often wished I could reassure the naive boy I was then that, as Leah had so wisely quoted, nothing was ever as bad as you expected it to be.

Perhaps an hour later, having got over her sulk, Rona appeared from the hollow-tree and smiled across at Bobby.

"See you tomorrow, Joe," he murmured, and slipped away hand in hand with the short, ugly, red-headed girl. I lay there a while longer, contemplating how awful life could be, and then climbed down and made my way back home.

So fresh were the memories that it was hard to credit that 50 years had elapsed since we had played in the tree beside the lake. For almost that long I lived on Earth and Cymbaline, having followed my parents into the profession of xeno-botany. I had always intended to return to Tartarus some day, but the time had never been quite right – I was always



busy or otherwise occupied. Then I heard on a news-cast that the evacuation of the planet had begun. I took the fastest sailship to Tartarus and arrived at Verlaine on the day before the Mallarmé province was due to be evacuated. I had thought that perhaps I would need more time to reacquaint myself with the haunts of my youth, but in the event I found that my memories were too poignant and that one day was quite enough.

With two hours to go before the TWC carrier transported the remaining citizens to Baudelaire, I left the house for the very last time and walked down to the lake.

Little had changed down the intervening years. The rolling green countryside was as I remembered it, fragrant and bedecked with flowers. So completely did the track to the lake – more a tunnel through thick, over-arching hedges – match my memory of it that I might have been transported back in time. Only the increased heat gave away the lie, and the dazzling, depthless white-hot sky. I passed familiar houses on my way, the open timber villas where Leah and the others had lived, empty and overgrown now like my own.

I arrived at the shore of the lake and noticed that a couple of the nearby hollow-trees had been felled – but not, I saw with a sudden start of relief, our own. I almost ran across to it. The ferns no longer concealed the entrance, and as I knelt and caressed the smooth, worn wood I marvelled that I had once been small enough to slip through the narrow gap. Now I could barely force my shoulder through the crevice. More than anything I wished I were able to climb up inside the tree, to renew my intimacy with the locale that had meant so much to me.

I stood and walked around the tree, to where its gnarled roots knuckled down towards the water's edge. I shaded my eyes and gazed up the length of the trunk, at the branches that began 30 metres above. With a thrill of recollection I made out the dark, triangular wedge of our fungal platform, and above it the small dark shapes of the dream-sacs.

I sat down with my back against the bole and stared out across the lake. The water level had dropped with the increased temperature over the years, and the island seemed correspondingly larger. I stared at the dry, grassy hump and for a second imagined that I could make out the Zillion.

On the eve of my encounter with the alien, I mooched around the house and garden, avoiding my parents and the inevitable questions they would ask. Why was I not outside, playing with my friends? The lie that I had to help my mother in the garden prevented my joining the others, but of course I realized that my friends would be occupied with other, more important things that evening, and would not welcome my interference. I could not bring myself to make up some hopeless lie with which to satisfy my parents.

I slept badly that night, dreaming of drowning in fathoms of water, of falling victim to the Zillion. I slept in till almost noon, then ate and read by turn

until the sun lowered itself behind the distant hills and a beautiful, peach-wine light flooded the countryside. The Zillion would be climbing from its underground lair about this time, to sit in the twilight and contemplate who knew what.

I left the house and made my way down the track. I was so absorbed with my fear that I was only half-aware of Bobby as he stepped from the concealment of the hedge and barred my way. He looked as terrified as I felt.

"Bobby? What's wrong?"

He took me by the shoulder and pushed me into the hedge, as if he feared we might be seen. "I've been waiting here for hours," he said. "I thought you'd never come out."

I shrugged, puzzled by his attitude. "I said I'd meet you at sunset... What's the matter, Bobby?"

"Look..." He couldn't bring himself to meet my gaze. "I wanted to tell you yesterday, but I couldn't..."

"Tell me what?"

He hesitated. "What he told you then, that he swam across to the island..."

My heart banged in joyous reprieve. "What, Bobby?"

"He didn't. He didn't do it. He was lying."

I stared at him.

"And the other things he said, about me and the others swimming across... we didn't do it, either."

I was speechless for long seconds. Then I said, "You could have said something yesterday."

"You don't understand. He said if we said anything, he'd tell my father about Rona and me, and Gabby and Satch. You know what my father would do if he found out that..." He reddened, then went on, "Last night Leah came and told me that we had to do something. I said I'd see you today."

"Leah?" I asked, like an idiot. "Leah said you had to tell me."

"What's so unusual about that?" He regarded me. "Look, why do you think Hulse treats you like he does? It's because Leah looks out for you, and Hulse doesn't like that."

I shook my head. The realization that Leah thought about me – albeit in the same way a sister thinks about her kid brother – was a strange and joyous revelation that dawned on me only slowly.

"So..." Bobby went on, "all you have to say is that your father was out on his boat all last week, and didn't see us swimming to the island. Tell Hulse he's lying and that you're not going to do the dare, okay?"

We continued down the track, through the dusk air filled with floating seed heads, and came to the lake that rippled at this time of day like molten gold. The others were beneath the tree, seated among the roots to gain a grandstand view of my swim. Even Satch was there, having vacated his sac especially for the event. He looked bleary-eyed and absent.

I noticed Leah and Rona glance edgily at Bobby, who nodded to them that everything was okay. Hulse had prepared a barbecue, a small fire roasting spitted fish. Last year he'd found a valuable silver lighter in the main street, dubbed himself the

Keeper of the Flame, and initiated a series of barbecues that he liked to think were the height of sophistication.

I stood hesitantly by the lake, watching them. Leah gave me a dazzling smile. I could only blush and look away. I told myself that it was better to be regarded by her as a little kid who needed her protection, than not regarded at all.

Hulse turned to me, waving a spitted spearback in the air. "Care for a last meal, kid?"

I was aware of all the eyes on me. "You don't eat before swimming," I heard myself say. "Didn't you know that?"

Hulse merely shrugged and turned away, while the others stared at me as if I'd taken leave of my senses. Perhaps I had. I had not planned to continue with the dare, but at Hulse's "last meal" jibe it had seemed the only thing to do. To confront Hulse with his lie and refuse the dare would be to admit my fear. To swim to the island, say good day the alien, swim back and then confront Hulse – now that would be a supreme victory.

Hulse passed around the cooked fish. The others sat with the plates on their laps, reluctant to feast while I drowned. Hulse had stolen a bottle of wine from his father's cellar. He poured himself a generous measure, enthroned himself among the roots, and gestured with his glass at the water.

"Your turn, kid," he said, and smiled.

I began unbuttoning my shirt. Leah opened her pretty mouth, goggling at me like the roast spearback. Gabby scowled at Bobby, who just shrugged. It was Rona who spoke up, "You don't have to do it, Joe." She turned on Hulse. "This is silly and unfair anyway!"

But already I'd removed my shirt, kicked off my shoes and turned to face the lake. The island seemed kilometres away. There was no sign, at this distance, of its alien occupant. I took a hesitant step forward, feeling the warm mud squelch between my toes, then waded out through the shallow water. It was warm after the heat of the day, but it was still a shock when the water reached my crotch. I gasped and, too buoyant to walk any further, launched myself forward. The lake enveloped me and I began a hurried breast-stroke, aware that my feeble technique must have looked comical from the shore. It was then, when I had committed myself and knew that there was no turning back, that my bravado collapsed and I knew fear. I tried to channel my nervous energy into physical action, at the same time conscious that I must pace myself. I slipped into an easy rhythm, controlled my breathing and set my sights on the irregularity of the island ahead. I gained confidence the further I went, and even wondered at the thoughts of my spectators on the shore. I considered turning and waving back at them, to show that I was okay, then thought better of such hubris.

Halfway to the island I paused and trod water, giving my tired arms a rest. So far, though strenuous, the swim had been easier than I had imagined. The water seemed to buoy me along. I realized that

a good part of my fear had been that of the swim itself. Now that I had gained confidence in my ability to reach the island alive, the thought of encountering the alien no longer seemed so terrible. Before I set off again, I turned and scanned the shore. My friends were no longer seated beneath the tree; they were standing in the shallows now, watching me intently. I rolled over and pushed off again, breathing easily and focussing on the knoll of green land that rose from the flat, shimmering gold expanse.

Perhaps five minutes later I reached the island. My spirits during the approach were lifted by the fact that I could not see the alien. In the past, at this time of the evening, it usually emerged from its lair and sat cross-legged on the sandy crescent that faced our tree. But the beach was deserted now, along with the rest of the island. It occurred to me that even if I reached the island and did not encounter the Zillion, at least I had achieved something that Hulse had been too cowardly to attempt.

My hand struck the lake bottom as it inclined to create the island. I stumbled upright, realizing only then how exhausted I was, and forced my legs step by weighted step through the shallows. The lake gave up its grip on me and, abruptly lightened, I stepped ashore and sat down abruptly on the sand. Breathing hard, I looked around. It came to me where I was, the amazing fact of my geographical relocation, as I stared back towards the shore and made out, tiny beneath the towering tree, the stick figures of my friends. I raised my hand in a lazy wave, and after a delay they signalled in return.

As the seconds elapsed I gained confidence, or perhaps it was nothing more than false bravery as I knew I was being watched by my friends. I climbed to my feet and walked around the island. It was small, and the circumnavigation took less than five minutes; other than the beach and a few rocks, it consisted of tough grass and gorse. When I passed from sight of my friends, I admit that a strange panic took me, an overwhelming need to be on the beach again. I hurried around the far side of the island, scrambling over a tumble of rocks, and breathed more easily when the familiar hollow-trees came into sight. I stood on the sand and waved across the water. I judged that I had given the Zillion sufficient time to emerge and attack me, and that I would not be shamed if I made the return crossing now.

Then some sixth sense – that *frisson* of awareness that comes when we know we are not alone – made me turn. The Zillion had climbed from his lair and stood watching me, perhaps five metres away. I could not move; a cold paralysis gripped me. We were a tableau that might have symbolized the very first meeting between alien and human, the representatives of different races stunned by fear and suspicion.

I had seen the alien through a telescope, of course. I was aware before the encounter of his general appearance, but at close quarters I was struck by his – its – reality, its animalness. It was bipedal, and

squat, and brought to mind nothing so much as a toad, with its moss-green, reptilian skin and bulbous head. That much I had known. What was new to me was the sound of its breathing – long and laboured – and its peculiar stench, like fish that had been left out in the sun to rot.

I would have turned and dived into the lake, but for the thought that the Zillion would be an expert swimmer and would apprehend me with ease. So, instead of fleeing, I did the very opposite. I took a hesitant step forward and held forth my hand.

I was motivated by fear, not bravery – propelled more by the need to ingratiate myself, to abase myself before this monster, than to assume any kind of superiority. Bobby told me later that from the shore I appeared confident and composed, but the truth was that I was shaking and sick with fear.

The alien regarded me unblinkingly for what seemed like minutes, and then made its move. I had expected either that it would turn and flee, as would most animals, or attack me: it did neither, but stepped forward, its gait infirm with what I took to be age, and matched my gesture with its own long, stringy right arm.

I touched its ice-cold fingertips, and the next I recall I was sitting cross-legged before the Zillion who had dropped into an easy, splay-kneed squat.

He regarded me with bulging golden eyes, and then spoke.

His English was limited, and almost incomprehensible. "Your name?"

"Joe, Joe Saunders," I replied before I could register amazement at his question. He touched his chest, where his oiled green skin was marked with three wide golden chevrons. "Zur-zellian," he said. "Welcome."

"I... I swam across. I wanted to see the island. I won't stay long. My friends are waiting. They'll be wondering what happened to me. I didn't mean to disturb you. I'm sorry if I'm trespassing..." I babbled on, a monologue borne of equal parts relief and crazed disbelief.

I spluttered to a stop. Zur-zellian blinked his great eyes, once. His voice was a low throaty rumble, and in retrospect each pronouncement reminded me of a release of air, a surge of bubbles through water. "How old are you?"

"I... I'm 14." I was sure that, had I been able to read his reptilian expression, I would have seen that nostalgic wonderment common to the galaxy over when oldsters regard the fact of youth.

"Fourteen. I..." Again, his long, double-jointed fingers touched his chest. "I am 400 of your years."

I wondered if he was aware of my expression: it must have been exaggerated enough. "Four hundred years old! *Four hundred?*"

"For 200, I have lived here..." He gestured with both hands. "In..." He closed his eyes, opened them again, "In retreat, meditating."

Something about his great age, the enormity of his two-century seclusion, scared me. Perhaps I felt again that I was intruding. At any rate, I made my excuses to leave. "It's... it's been good to talk with

you," I said, jumping up quickly. "I must go now. My friends... they're waiting for me."

He stood, slowly, and regarded me. I thought he said, "Come again," but I might have been mistaken. I backed off, sketching a hurried wave, and stumbled into the lake. In irrational panic I swam away from the island, as if, contrary to all logic, the alien might decide now to attack. As the minutes passed and I controlled my hurried strokes, I began to regret my hasty departure. I considered all the questions I should have asked him. Had he really invited me back to his island, and would I have the courage to accept his invitation?

Half-way to the shore I paused and, treading water, looked back at the island. The beach was deserted; the meeting might have been a figment of my imagination. I continued towards the stand of hollow-trees, and my friends awaiting my return.

Bobby, Rona and Gabby waded into the shallows and hauled me out, with Leah and Satch not far behind. "What happened?" Gabby squealed. "We saw it come from its hole. It was right behind you!"

"What did it say?" Bobby asked, awe in his expression. Leah gripped my arm, his small hands hot on my wet skin. "Thought you'd had it, didn't we? Thought the alien'd got you, Joe."

I laughed and spluttered explanations, a hurried description of my meeting with the alien. I told them that he was called Zur-zellian, from which the name by which we knew him must have derived, and that he had been in retreat on the island for 200 years.

I fielded other questions, unaccustomed to being the centre of attention, and then looked past my friends to where Hulse stood beneath the tree, glaring at me with homicide in his eyes.

The others saw the direction of my gaze and fell silent, then moved aside as I made my way across to Hulse. I stopped before him, aware of his clenched fists, his glare. At any other time I might have been fazed, but my encounter with the alien had bestowed me with strength, not to mention a righteous anger.

"You liar!" I spat at him. "You filthy, cowardly liar!" And, though I had not intended to hit him, I lashed out with my fist and surprised myself when I connected with his cheek. He lost his balance, then his footing, and went slithering down the root system and fetched up in the lake.

A part of me felt like running, to save myself from the beating I knew I was about to receive. But I held my ground. Perhaps I realized that, even if he did beat me to a pulp now, the victory would still be mine.

But instead of attacking me he launched himself from the lake and, pressing his fingers to his cheek, ran past me up the bank and disappeared along the lane. The others watched him, slack-jawed to a person. I was so confused I could not meet their eyes, beset with the emotions of residual rage, elation, and maybe even shame at my outburst of violence and its consequences.

I hurried around the tree, slipped into the crevice,

and climbed and climbed, corkscrewing up past our platform, past the first dream-sac that Satch had made his own, until I came to the narrow opening that gave access to the second sac.

So much had happened in the past hour that I needed to be alone for a while. I had taken refuge in the sac at traumatic times in the past – at least, what I considered traumatic times; when Hulse's bullying had become too much, when I interpreted Leah's silences as personal snubs – and I'd always emerged calm and renewed.

I crawled along the branch until I came to the great pendant polyp of the dream-sac, its entrance curling from beneath the branch like the horn of some huge musical instrument, inviting animals to enter. I stripped off my sodden shorts, left them outside to dry, and squirmed naked down the narrow tunnel and into the sac. Sunlight struck through the diaphanous envelope, turning the air within a golden apricot hue. Immediately upon my entry, the sac began secreting its hallucinogenic gastric juices. The containing membranes ran with a sticky, sebaceous fluid, anointing my nakedness and filling the air with its heady, dream-inducing perfume. Smaller animals than myself would have been digested, but the only effect on humans was a sensuous, vision-filled slumber. I stretched out along the length of the sac, luxuriating in the sensation of the fluid washing over me, and closed my eyes.

A matter of seconds seemed to pass before the hallucinogen began its work; I heard a sharp rapping sound on the branch outside the sac, followed by a small voice. "Joe..." I heard, as if from a million miles away. "Joe, can I come in?"

Sleepily aware that the sound had an external source, I opened my eyes. Leah's head poked through the entrance, staring at me. "Joe," she smiled. "Coming in, okay?"

A part of me thought that my greatest wish was coming true, while another ascribed the vision to the effect of the drug. I stared up through the entrance as Leah removed her leggings, and then her blouse, folded them neatly and piled them beside my shorts.

She wore only briefs and a halter top now, blindingly white against her brown skin. With a quick glance down at me, she choreographed two swift moves – a quick twist and a bend – and was suddenly and startlingly naked. Feet first she dropped into the sac and lay beside me, looking at me with a neutral expression on her perfect face.

Were it not for the sedative effect of the hallucinogen, I'm sure I would have had a heart attack. The confines of the sac ensured that we were pressed together, our bodies lubricated by the fluid. Leah moved on top of me, ran a hand through my hair and kissed my face perhaps a dozen times, as if experimenting. I held her to me, the feel of her small hot body enough to make me faint. I had never before been with a girl; in my fantasies, our liaisons had been swift and mechanical, bereft of tactile sensations, heft or pressure. What struck me then – or rather later, when I had time to dwell on what had happened – was how gloriously physical and lubri-

cious our lovemaking was. I was ignorant of the moves to make, and could only lie in ecstasy while Leah moved, moaning, to an age-old rhythm.

Later I held onto her, loath to let her go, as I felt the drug take hold and drag me into unconsciousness. In my dreams I was flying through the stratosphere, with Leah by my side.

When I came to my senses, perhaps hours later, I was quite alone. I cried out in despair as it came to me that our tryst had been in my dreams only – but how, I asked myself, could something so traumatic and *memorable* be no more than hallucination? I struggled into a sitting position, then squirmed through the tunnel entrance and into the light of the moons.

Leah was sitting on the branch, her knees drawn up to her chest, watching me with a sleepy smile on her face. I was aware of my nakedness, of Leah's, as I knelt on the branch before her. I was speechless, sick with apprehension and emotions I had never experienced until then. I reached out, and before I knew it I was holding her and – an indication of my confusion – sobbing against her shoulder.

She ran a hand through my hair, then drew back her head to look at me, and wiped the tears from my cheeks with her finger-tips.

"I didn't know..." I began, but couldn't finish. I wanted to say that I didn't know she cared. Leah smiled and shook her head. "Always liked you, Joe. You just never realized."

"But... but Hulse?"

She whispered, "What about him, Joe?"

She reached out, took my hand, and drew me back into the dream-sac.

We were inseparable, after that. Every day from dawn to dusk, and beyond, we spent in each other's company. She would call at my house as dawn touched the sky, and my mother would find me and say, with that knowing pleased smile of all mothers, "Your little friend's here, Joe."

We made love, but mostly we talked. I got to know her, and her me. My infatuation with her matured as I came to understand the person that Leah was; I grew to love her, to love her faults and inconsistencies as well as her attributes, her humour and consideration.

I once asked her about Hulse. "What did you see in him, Leah? Why did you like him?"

"Was silly and stupid and vain," she replied with her usual lazy honesty.

"He was older and strong and he showed an interest in me, and he was the first, and... oh, just wanted to be seen with him." She smiled at me. "Then, came to see what he was really like, how cruel he was. Then you paid him back, made him seem just *this* big –" she pressed together her thumb and forefinger. "And it wasn't, like, *can't* be seen with him now – it was just, *don't* want anything more to do with this creep."

During that first magical week, I forever expected Hulse to show himself, to disrupt our idyll with threats of violence, or, worse, with violence itself.

But he stayed away, and the six of us continued as if the incident beside the lake had never happened. We spent the mornings in the tree, playing games and talking and laughing, and then, with silent consent, we drifted away two by two and made love during the long, hot afternoons. Evenings, we met again and ate packed meals as the sun set and the moons sailed over the lake. We must have gone for walks from time to time, or swam in the lake, but if so I cannot recall these occasions. I remember only the hollow-tree, and the dream-sac, and Leah's gentle, lazy laughter as we joked and traded secrets.

Hulse's return to the fold was neither as dramatic nor as threatening as I had feared. We were gathered on the platform one quiet evening, watching the sun go down, when sounds echoing up through the tree indicated company. All eyes were turned to the crevice as Hulse, showing not the slightest sign of embarrassment or injured pride, emerged bearing bottles of wine.

I should have guessed that someone with Hulse's vanity would have ulterior motives in rejoining our group. After depositing the wine, he turned to the crevice and held out his hand. From the trunk emerged a girl – no, a woman – several years our senior. She wore a long dress quite unsuited to the conditions, cosmetics in the latest style, and a smile that was as insincere as it was patronizing. Hulse introduced her as Susanna, opened the wine and offered a toast. "To old friendships," he said. "May they continue for ever."

We accommodated the reprobate in our group, made his superior girlfriend as welcome as we were able, and drank until the stars came out. Hulse was affable to me, as if our altercation was forgotten, and neutrally polite to Leah. She regarded him through slitted eyes and, though pleasant enough in his company, confided to me in private that she would never trust him until his last breath.

The following weeks passed in pleasant days spent in the tree or enjoying barbecues beside the lake. I never spoke with Hulse about his lie concerning the dare, and he for his part never stooped to his old barbs or bullying tactics. While I could not claim that he became a friend, I was willing to forget old enmities, and we got along reasonably well. Even Susanna, the daughter of a rich businessman from Baudelaire, became one of the group. She exchanged her dress for more suitable clothing, dispensed with make-up and joined in with our juvenile games and jokes. Hulse seemed devoted to her; they too made their excuses, disappeared in the afternoon. I never had any reason to suspect that he was merely using her to his own ends.

There was a solar flare that summer, a great gout of flame that exploded from the bloated sun and illuminated the sky for a full week. We took to camping on the platform at night, watching the spectacular gold and magenta aurora flicker from horizon to horizon. For a month after the flare the temperature climbed day by day; the land was parched and seared, and the authorities declared Mallarmé province a total fire-ban area. We sun-bathed beside

the lake and went without our barbecues.

Later that summer Leah and I spent long days alone together, wandering through the hills, staying at rest-houses and hostels – playing, in other words, at being grown up. It seemed inconceivable that the summer might end. I knew that in a month we would return to our respective schools, but a month was a long time, and anyway there would be all the years in the future that we would be able spend together. I was young, and in love, and it was entirely forgivable that I should give no thought to the possibility that we might ever be parted.

Fifty years...

As I sat with my back against the rearing hollow-tree, staring out across the sun-drenched lake, it seemed impossible that half a century had elapsed since those innocent children played and loved in the branches high above. If I listened hard enough, I convinced myself that I could hear their laughter, far away.

Tragedy, in retrospect, always seems so terribly arbitrary and accidental – the culminating consequence of so many smaller incidents and occurrences that we are as powerless to prevent at the time as we are after the event. How often down the years had I looked back and tried to discern, in vain, some obvious signal or pointer as to what was about to happen?

The prelude to the finale came when Leah asked me about my encounter with Zur-zellian. We lay side by side on our stomachs, our chins hooked over the lips of the fungus, and stared down at the lake. The others had not yet arrived, and we were quite alone. Leah lodged her chin on her fist and said, "Tell me 'bout the Zillion again, Joe."

I laughed and recounted the meeting. I must have gone over the events of the day a hundred times with her. She seemed fascinated with the story, and when I said as much she just gave the laziest of her smiles and drawled, "Might never have come to love you, Joe, but for the alien."

She quizzed me about its coloration, the sound of its voice. She asked me what it had said, and seemed dissatisfied that I had not thought to ask it more about itself.

I dropped a twig over the edge, watched it fall for ages before hitting the water and creating an ever widening concentric ripple.

"Look," I said at last, having made my decision, "why don't we go over to the island and I'll introduce you to Zur-zellian."

She lifted her face from her fist and stared at me. "You would?"

"Why not? He is an old friend, after all. Zur-zellian, meet Miss Leah Reverdy. Leah, meet Mr Zur-zellian, the resident on the island for 200 years."

She laughed. "We can go today? This afternoon?" I had prepared myself for a lazy day in the tree. "How about tomorrow afternoon?" I suggested. "We can pick salafex pods and paddle over, okay?"

She hugged me. "Wonderful," she said. "Look forward to that."

The others arrived, shortly after that. It was Susanna's last day in Verlaine, as she was leaving for Baudelaire with her father in the morning. Hulse brought wine and a hamper and threw a farewell party. I recall little of the actual event, except that I felt a vague uneasiness. With Susanna around, Hulse had been tolerable, even – though I'm loath to admit it – friendly. I wondered what might happen when Susanna left. Would Hulse still seek our company, try to win Leah back? As if to confirm my fears, I caught him sneaking glances at her when he thought I wasn't looking. Evidently, Leah noticed his attention, too. Later that afternoon, she pulled me to my feet in front of Hulse and suggested out loud that I take her to a dream-sac.

The following afternoon Leah called for me and we walked hand in hand to the lake. I climbed a salafex tree and threw two great seed pods down to her. We stripped to our shorts and kicked off our shoes, then waded into the water clutching the pods. Now that the time had come for Leah to meet the alien, I could sense that she was as apprehensive as she was excited. Even I felt a tingle of nervousness as we set off from the shore and paddled slowly in the direction of the island.

With the increase in temperature since the solar flare, the water of the lake had warmed. With the seed pod to keep me afloat, this crossing was a luxury compared to the last. We took our time and arrived at the island within 15 minutes. I held Leah's hand as we stood on the beach, staring up at the grassy knoll as if expecting the alien to appear at any second. Exhibiting a bravery I would not have felt if I were alone, I squeezed Leah's hand and led her up the beach to the centre of the island. The grass was tinder-dry and yellowed, rustling against our feet as we walked up the knoll.

Perhaps alerted by the sound of our footsteps, the alien appeared at the entrance to his subterranean lair – a circular hollow for all the world like a rabbit burrow, though larger. At the sight of his broad, green face in the shadows, his golden eyes staring out like beacons, Leah started and jumped back, clutching my hand. I reassured her that it was okay, and waved in greeting to Zur-zellian.

He emerged from the burrow, his arm outstretched in a repeat of the greeting we had exchanged weeks before. We sat down, Leah kneeling cautiously by my side, the alien bending into his familiar, wide-kneed crouch.

I made the introduction. "This is Leah," I said, "my friend."

Hesitantly, she reached out and touched fingertips with the alien. "Welcome to my island, Leah," he said in his slow, bubbling voice.

"Joe... Joe told me about meeting you," she said hesitantly. "Wanted to meet you, ask you questions, if you don't mind?"

He turned his hand in a gesture that might have indicated acceptance. "I will answer what I can."

Leah turned to me and smiled.

She shrugged and stared wide-eyed at the alien. "Oh," she said, "where to begin...?" She paused, then,

"Of course: where do you come from, which planet?" She spoke with exaggerated care, pronouncing each word separately.

Zur-zellian blinked. "From Zanthar, the small planet of a small sun beyond the star cluster you humans know as the Nilakantha Stardrift."

"Joe said you've been here 200 years," she went on, "but why Tartarus? Why did you come here?"

"Because... I had to go somewhere. Tartarus was quiet, secluded. At that time, there was no community beside the lake. I needed to be alone to meditate, and the island was perfect."

"Meditate..." Leah said, savouring the word. "Are you a philosopher?"

The alien blinked. "I am what humans would call a monk."

Leah turned to me and made an exaggerated, drop-jawed expression of surprise. She returned her attention to Zur-zellian. "A monk? Do you believe in a God?" We had discussed this between ourselves over the weeks, usually after making love in the evenings and staring up at the stars. Leah had confidently proclaimed herself an atheist, and I, having never really given the matter much thought, agreed that I was, too.

The alien replied, "I believe in gods, in many gods. Over the years I have come to know them."

"You have?" Leah goggled. "You came to Tartarus to meet the gods?" I could not tell from its facial features, but I wondered if the alien was smiling at her. "To meet the gods and my destiny."

She repeated the word in a whisper. "You'll meet your destiny on Tartarus?"

"I will remain here until the end," he said.

"You're staying here?" Leah almost cried.

"It is my destiny to go in flame."

She was shaking her head. I could see her mind working, her disbelief reflected in her features. She was a young girl, and life seemed endless, and she could not comprehend how the alien could so stoically contemplate his death.

"But you could leave with the evacuation," she said.

"I have had a long life. I have achieved everything. I will follow my destiny." We remained on the island for perhaps an hour, Leah asking Zur-zellian all manner of questions. I delighted in watching her response, her exclamations of surprise, her frowns and grimaces, as much as I was interested in the alien's answers.

At last, after a thoughtful silence, she said slowly, "If you're a monk, a religious person, then can you marry people?"

I stared at her, but she would not meet my gaze. Zur-zellian replied. "On my planet we have certain... bonding ceremonies, and I officiated at them, yes."

"Then, in that case... I mean – could you marry Joe and me?"

Still looking at the alien, she found my hand and squeezed, forestalling my protests.

Zur-zellian was old and wise, and must have known that we were young and foolish. In his reply he showed great... *humanity*, if that is the right

word to use. He turned his hand in an equable gesture. "My blessing would have no legality on Tartarus," he said, "but, if both of you are willing, I can bless you and so confirm your love in the eyes of the gods."

By the time we left the island, clutching our seed pods and paddling for the far shore, Leah had arranged a date. We were to be "married" in a week's time, on her 14th birthday.

It remained our secret; we did not want our friends to know in case word got back to our parents. Leah glowed with the knowledge of what was to take place. She seemed radiant, her contented, lazy smile ever-present. The others noticed something changed about her – Gabby even asked her if she were pregnant – but Leah just smiled and shook her head and withdrew into silent communion with her thoughts.

My immediate fears concerning Hulse were unfounded. With Susanna departed, he did not bother us with his company, clearly unwilling to be seen as the odd one out in the group. A couple of times over the next day or two I did see him standing across the lane from the hollow-tree, staring at us with what I interpreted to be solitary longing. Not that his brooding presence overly bothered me: I had other things on my mind, and I no longer considered Hulse a threat.

When he made his move, I was quite unprepared.

We spent the day before our "wedding" walking in the hills, and night was falling by the time we made our way back home. I had decided, since it was a special occasion, that Leah should spend the night with me in my room. I would sneak her in past my parents and for the first time we would make love in my bed.

We were walking up the track, our arms about each other, when Hulse appeared from nowhere and barred our way. He carried a wooden club, and before I could collect my wits and run, he attacked.

I recall only a hail of blows, and Leah's screamed entreaties for him to stop, before I fell to the ground and tried to squirm away. He came after me, kicked me in the ribs so that I rolled gasping onto my back, and then straddled my chest. He forced the stick beneath my chin and pushed my head back, almost strangling me.

His head hung above me, silhouetted against the star field, and his long fringe fell across his face as he panted with the exertion of keeping me pinioned to the ground. I bucked like a landed fish, but he applied pressure to my neck. I spluttered that he was killing me.

"I will kill you, you bastard! I'll kill you if you don't leave Leah!"

I tried my best to laugh. Then I swore and spat in his face. He grimaced down at me, and his expression, more than his assault, sent a surge of fear through me.

"It was going so well... and then you came along, you bastard!"

And with the epithet he pressed down on the club, and I swear he would have killed me were it not for

what Leah did then.

She had been silent for some seconds, and I had assumed she'd gone for help – but now she returned, burdened with some heavy object. She dropped the boulder on Hulse. He cried out in pain, rolled from me and staggered to his feet, holding his head and moaning. I sat up, alternately gagging and gasping down great breaths of air. Leah, not done with her attack, launched herself at Hulse and bundled him into the ditch. She leaned over him and hissed invective in his face, the words too rapid and impassioned for me to make out. He cried out in wounded pride at what she said, pushed her away and staggered off down the lane. Leah ran across to me and helped me to my feet.

"Joe! You okay, Joe?"

"I'll live," I assured her, shaking now at the thought of the assault. "The *maniac!* The crazy, stinking maniac..."

"Come on, we'll get you home."

We continued up the lane and into the garden. It was late, and the house was in darkness. Silently we crept through the entrance arch and up the stairs to my room. There Leah inspected me. But for a few minor scrapes and a bruise across my neck, I was fine.

She insisted on bathing my battered torso, and I basked in her concern.

That night we made love in my bed as the cooling breeze lapped over us, and at first light next morning Leah rose quickly and dressed.

"Happy birthday," I said sleepily from the bed.

She came over and kissed me before she slipped away. "Meet you on the island at noon," she whispered. "Why not by the lake? We can swim over together."

She pushed her fingers through my hair. "Don't you know anything, Joe? Bride and groom don't go to church together..." And with that she hurried from the room.

I slept, then woke to the sunlight streaming through the window. I lay in bed and smelled Leah's scent on the sheets, and the thought of what the day would bring was a physical thrill within my chest. An hour before noon I rose and dressed and crossed to the drawer where I'd concealed Leah's birthday present, a silver necklace. It was then, standing beside the window, that I glanced out and saw activity in the lake.

A moving divot of displaced water showed on the otherwise pristine azure expanse. As I stared, I saw others, five or six – swimmers, I realized with disbelief, heading out from the shore towards the island.

My heart hammering, I pocketed the necklace and ran from the house. I sprinted down the lane, angered that on this day of all days others should decide to go to the island. I emerged from the lane and came to a halt on the shore. I stared out across the water and saw that the first swimmer was Hulse, with the others in his wake; they seemed to be gesturing and shouting at him to turn back.

We had told no one about our marriage, and so his invasion could only be a terrible coincidence. Almost

in tears, I cursed Hulse and swore that I would kill him. By the time I dived into the water, deciding not to waste time collecting a seed pod to aid my crossing, Hulse was almost at the island.

I swam with all my might, intent only on doing grievous harm to my enemy. The others had reached the island and stood in knot on the beach, clearly remonstrating with Hulse. I was wondering what had happened to Leah, when I saw her. She appeared suddenly on the knoll atop the island, arms akimbo, and stared down at the invaders. I could tell by her stance that she was furious. Hulse advanced up the beach, followed by the others. Gasping and swimming frantically, I watched as events unfolded in a terrible, inevitable slow-motion.

Hulse confronted Leah and for perhaps a minute they argued. Then he stepped forward and struck her. She staggered back, holding her cheek. At that second Zur-zellian appeared by her side. Hulse went for Leah again, hit her and knocked her down; she stumbled from sight, disappearing down the other side of the rise. Then Hulse turned to the alien. I cried out in rage and frustration. The others, my friends, Bobby and Gabby, Rona and even the soporific Satch, surrounded Hulse. He pushed them away, ran to the top of the island and, instead of attacking the alien, which I had expected, knelt and seemed to reach into the grass. I saw something silver glint in his hand, and pure dread exploded in my head.

The island went up in a sheet of flame. One second it was an idyllic, grassy isle, and the next it was transformed into a blazing torch. Even Hulse, aware of what he intended, could do nothing to escape the conflagration. He turned and ran as the flames

whipped about him, then fell as goutts of fire leapt at him like wild animals. The others stood no chance. Within seconds they were surrounded by a circle of fire, tiny, petrified figures huddling together on the knoll. I cried out for them to run, but, even as I yelled, the fire consumed them and they fell to the ground and rolled in a futile attempt to douse the raging flames. The furnace roar swept across the water, and seconds later I felt the full force of its heat in my face. I cried out Leah's name. I could not believe that our special day had turned within seconds to tragedy.

I never made it to the island. I was floundering, perhaps a hundred metres from the beach, when I heard a sudden roar and a powerboat cut its engines nearby. Strong hands reached out and dragged me, protesting, to safety. The last I saw, as I grasped the gunnel and stared at the island, was Zur-zellian. He was kneeling on the knoll with his arms in the air, consumed by flame and reconciled to his destiny.

I left the hollow-tree and walked along the road and up the hill to the grave-garden overlooking the lake.

The TWC transporter waited on the greensward beyond the cemetery. I judged that I had time to pay my last respects before it departed. I entered the garden and walked through the trees and the grave-stones.

Other citizens had come to say their last farewells, too, but the glade that was my destination was empty. I paused on the incline, staring down at the gravestones side by side, and fighting back the tears stepped forward and made my way down the slope.

I paused before the first headstone, set proudly in the short, well-tended grass. I wiped my eyes and



read the name. "Bobby," I said. I moved to the next stone. "Gabby." And the next two. "Rona, Satch..." I paused before the next headstone, even now unable to suppress the bitterness that welled up within me. "Hulse Gabor," I read, and asked him, as I'd asked him many times before, *why*?

The last stone of all was set a little apart from the others. I crossed to it, knelt and bowed my head. We do these things, we follow well-worn protocol, but I do not know why: the dead are dead and nothing we can do, no respect we pay, can ever alter that. We go through these meaningless rituals in order to help ourselves, but I knew that in my case it was no help.

I read the headstone: "Zur-zellian, an alien visitor to Tartarus, 675?–1075."

I closed my eyes and heard the songs of the birds in the trees, felt the heat of the sun on my face. I was almost ready to go, to leave the planet of my birth for ever, when I heard a sound behind me.

"Joe... Joe Saunders?" A woman's voice. "It is you, Joe?"

I turned and stared and was filled with a powerful emotion – that heart-wrenching ache we experience when confronted with a reminder of who we once were, of who we might have become.

"Leah?" I said.

She was small, and dark, and the passing years had been kind. She was as beautiful as I remembered her, with just a touch of grey in her short, dark hair.

"Joe. Joe, it's been so long."

Instinctively we both reached out, and at arm's length held hands, and with the physical contact the years seemed to fall away.

I was back aboard the powerboat as it edged around the island, and I felt again that sudden, heart-exploding joy when I saw Leah scrambling in a daze across the rocks to safety. She had collapsed into my arms with tears of pain and relief, but it had never been the same again...

We had tried to renew our relationship after the tragedy – oh, how I had tried. We met every day during that last month before we returned to our respective schools, but something had happened to change the girl I loved. I tried to talk about what had occurred that day on the island, but Leah remained determinedly locked in the fastness of her silence. Our love had brought about, however indirectly, the deaths of our friends and the alien, and this knowledge was too much for Leah.

The summer holiday came to an end, and I returned to Mallarmé city, and when next I came home I sought out Leah, but there was nothing between us, the spark had died. I told my parents that I wished to leave Tartarus after all, and sailed for Earth shortly after my 15th birthday.

Now I put my arms around Leah's shoulders and walked her from the glade. We turned and stared down at the silent graves. At last she asked, "Did you ever find anyone, Joe?"

I shrugged. "There were one or two women... nothing lasting or serious." I glanced at her. "You?"

"I met a fine man. We married, had children. You

would have approved of him, Joe. He passed away five years ago."

Unable to find a suitable response, I nodded. "You stayed here, on Tartarus?"

She shook her head. "After college I left for Earth, then settled on Mars."

A silence descended as we stared down into the glade. Leah looked up at me, and I saw tears in her eyes.

"Oh, Joe, I was so young and foolish... I wanted to talk about what happened. I got your address from your parents, but by the time I reached Earth you'd left. I needed to find you, Joe, talk to you." She drew a long breath and shook her head. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. It was all my fault."

I squeezed her hand. "It was no one's fault, Leah. No one's. Hulse was unstable. He wanted revenge."

"But he would never have... he would never have done what he did if it hadn't been for me."

I corrected her. "Leah, he resented Zur-zellian because it was the alien that brought us together. Don't you remember? I called Hulse's bluff and swam across to the island, and then you came to me in the dream-sac. Hulse had it in for Zur-zellian ever since then."

"It wasn't that, Joe," she whispered in a voice as light as the breeze. "It was my fault. It was because of me that he did what he did!"

"Leah..." I remonstrated.

"Listen to me, Joe..." She stared up at me, determination in her large brown eyes. "That night, do you remember the night he attacked you, and I beat him off? Well, I told him that I never wanted to see him again, that I hoped he'd drop dead. And I told him we were to be married by the Zillion the following day."

She was silent for long seconds, then went on, "Don't you see, Joe? If I hadn't told him that, then... then he wouldn't have gone across to the island to disrupt the ceremony. And Bobby and Gabby and Rona and Satch and Zur-zellian... they'd all be alive, and you and I might have..."

I just stared at her as silver tears coursed down her cheeks, and I thought of our time together after the fire, her silence, her reluctance to talk about what had happened.

She shook her head. "I couldn't bring myself to tell you during those last weeks, Joe, and for all these years I've lived with the guilt."

There was nothing I could say; words were redundant. As I stared at the woman I had loved a long time ago, I realized that only gestures remained, now, to show her that I was sorry and that I cared.

We stood by the glade, our arms about each other, as the transporter's siren sounded that the time had come for us to leave.

Eric Brown is currently putting the finishing touches to his fourth sf book, a follow-up to the well-received *The Time-Lapsed Man* (1990), *Meridian Days* (1992) and *Engineman* (1994) for Pan Books. He continues to live in Bronte-land, Yorkshire.

This is the story of how I saved Chicago from a Second Flood, stopped my sister from going totally Buggy, and earned a promotion right out of the lite-servo class to alpha-symbland, all in the same day.

With a little help from Big Eater, of course.

That fateful morning started like any other.

The wordbird woke me at seven out of my heaven. Not at all synthetic, just the old deltawave-syncretic. Rem-memories hazed my gaze. Just like a scream-curse, I seemed stuck in my dreamverse. Though it wasn't so bad, maybe even triple-gonad. Something about drifting forever down a river of feathers. On my back, I was catching up on my slack. Coasting along just humming a song. Mighty nice change from my strife-life brain-drain. Which the nerdbird was still harp-harp-hopping on.

"Time to get up, time to get up! Now seven-oh-one-oh-three! You'll be late for work, Corby! Time to get up!"

The sweet dream had fled, so shaking my head, I climbed out of bed. It reverted to a couch almost before I could uncrouch.

"Okay, okay! Shut your trap, I'm done with my nap."

The wordbird closed its beak right in mid-squeak.

I could tell from the rhymes that ran through my skull that it was way past time for me to get well. So the first bore-chore I attended to was to rip-strip my old KabiPharm latch-patch off and slap a fresh one on behind my ear. The sensitive sensor, so as not to offend, changed to rich cocoa brown, my own skin-blend.

As the tropes perfused, I asked for the news.

The General Magic endoplants in the wordbird reacted to my voice-choice. The big bright parrot on its perch, interrupted in mid-preen, began to recite the CNN audio feed coming through the multiplex tether that also fixed it to its perch.

"Yesterday Mayor Jordan launched a week-long celebration of his eightieth birthday by officially opening the new Joliet station on the extension of the Chi-Mon DASA magnatrain line. Attending the ceremonies were the N.U. P.M., the Director of the Great Lakes Bioregion, several World Bank officials, and many of the Mayor's old teammates. All were present at an exclusive party later that night, featuring entertainment by a host of the most uptaking stars from Bollywood to Taikong, including the Newsy Floozy, Jonny Kwesti, and Wubbo the Whale.

"A spokesdaemon for the Transgenic Oversight Committee has issued a warning that the notorious rogue splice known as Krazy Kat is suspected to have infiltrated the G.L.B. All franchises are asked to report any suspicious sightings to their commensal buzzworms or to patrolling TAC-TOCs.

"An Anti-Em demonstration in front of the Board of Trade erupted in violence late in the afternoon. The familiar chant of 'No mods, no mixes!' soon changed to shouts of 'Burn the miscegenators!'. Authorities declared an emergency risk-bubble of ninety naders intensity covering three square blocks for a duration of thirty minutes plus-minus and dis-

BIG *Eater*

Paul Di Filippo

persed clouds of Riotnip and Incontibarf.

"On financial fronts, the Hang Seng Index registered a day of heavy trading, reflecting the turmoil on the Prague exchange. Dalal Street responded by..."

"Softer," I ordered the bird, and the parrot voice of the Central Nerve Net dipped in audibility to a low reassuring murmur.

A wordbird is a primitive, limited way to interface with CNN, I know, but it was all I was permitted by my altered bioparms. The same incident that had left my neurocircuits a bit scrambled and prone to rhyme-times made it impossible for me to experience virtuality or even plain three-dee any more.

You see, I was one of the Hiphop Heads.

Not many people remembered the incident. I mean, so much happened nowadays, and things changed so fast. What with the Temp-Trop War and the Grey Goo Booboo intervening – well, it's not surprising lots of lesser scandals and yocto-minute-wonders were forgotten. After all, the whole affair happened over ten years ago. Though it did affect three million plus-minus people. But scattered across the whole North American Union, the victims were only about four percent of the population. Anyway, what happened was this.

Some three million percipients were tuned into Virtual Music Transmission's half-hour show known as "Rap Klassix" when VMT experienced an act of sabotage. (As I recall, the individual or group responsible was never positively identified; suspects ranged from the Sons of Dixie to the Limbo Cannons.) In an instant, before any of the perks knew what was happening or could disengage, VMT's baud rate was tripled, safety overrides were disabled, and new templates were laid over the standard transmission.

The add-on routines consisted of an illegal copy of Microprose's Hardcore Reform (TM), which was normally licensed only to government and gembaitch penal institutions.

The intruder master software did its job. Locking out the volition centres of the perks, taking as its text the innocent raps, Hardcore Reform (TM) reamed new neural pathways in three million brains, establishing the 50-year-old raps as dominant behaviour paradigms.

By the time the authorities shut VMT down, three million people had had their brains rewired.

At age thirteen, innocent cheb still living with his Mom and Sis in the gecekondü projex, I was one of them.

Well, to make a hairy narry less scary, the trope-dosers and mccoys eventually fixed most of the neural damage the terrorists had wrought. Except for one minor tic.

*All us perks who got our brains skew-fried
Would carry inside till the day we true-died
A distributed web of spurting nerve gaps
That made us want to rhyme out our urb raps.*

The best that the big labs like Novo Nordisk and Cantab and NeosePharm could do was batch up a trope that alleviated the symptoms. A daily dose of poemasomes kept the Tourette-like syndrome mostly in check. Except during times of stress, or often just upon waking, or if I ingested any other really radical tropes, I was pretty much normal in my speech and thought patterns.

Naturally there were lawsuits and, eventually, damages awarded. Each victim got ten thousand NU-dollars.

I gave half to my Mom. I'm sorry to say that she nulled the whole balance on a single trip to the tribal casinos at Second Mesa, without even enough left for the side excursion to the Grand Canyon by LED-zep that she had always wanted to take. I gave a thousand to my sister, Charmaine, and we all know how she spent hers. As for me, I was determined not to waste my share.

Although before the incident I hadn't really devoted much thought to getting out of the projex, afterwards I was really determined to make a life for myself, having seen the trouble that could come from lying around all day on the prole-dole just inhabiting virtuality. So I daleyed a minor city official and got my name illegally posted to the list of lottery-chosen prospects for CivServ jobs. With the remainder of the eft, I latched the black meds that allowed me to pass the aptitude test with a low grade. (I would have scored higher, but under the stress my essay came out rhymed, and they took off points.) Combined with my official disability status, the score got me my first-ever and still current job: humble Eater Feeder under the boss of our corps, Cengiz Ozturk.

Who was going to be mighty pissed this morning if I was late again.

So I poured Pioneer plantmilk over a bowl of Stress-gen Supercereal and slurped it down. I slipped into my blue and gold CivServ Windskin uniform, and was almost out the door of my fission-cee when a personal message with a high-priority code got past my filters and loudly interrupted the barely audible CNN feed.

"Corby," squawked the parrot, "this is your mother! I'm calling from home! Get over here right away, it's your sister!"

Before I could argue back that I'd be late for work if I did what she wanted, and couldn't she handle things herself, Mom had cut the connection, leaving me with no choice except to jump my rump to her bawl-call.

I kicked a chair and started to swear, then I bolted down the stairs.

On the intrametro train I cudgelled my brain. What could have gone amiss with Sis?

Before you could count from two to six, there I was at the gecekondü projex.

The projex had been old when I was a tad; now they looked ancients than Adam's NAD. Unsmart buildings lined dingy streets; hustling nonfranchises littered the plazas of grocrete. Each had a scam or a story to tell; a tale of woe or something to sell. Mutawins and hojats were on stroll-patrol, encountering vexy derision from babydolls with sexy sincisions. The scene was total jhuggi jopri, and all my troubled past flooded back on me. But I held my head high and walked on by. In blue and gold, now adult-old, I strode past the various hawkers proud and tall, showing them I didn't belong here at all.

Hoping I could control my rhymes if only I thought about neutral times, I remembered the history of the projex.

Way back in the 'Teens, during the Last Jihad, just after the Fall of Istanbul, the IMF began allotting refugees to various countries, cities and bioregions. Chicago had gotten mostly Turks and a smattering of Crobanians, who had all been forcibly funnelled into the hastily constructed projex.

One of these flee-'gees had been my Dad.

Dad had fallen in love with a local girl named Chita Garvey – my Mom, of course – who happened then to be a very xinggan Cubaitian some sixteen years old. Dad's relatives weren't too uptaking about the eventual multicult marriage, which was soon followed by the birth of a son, then a daughter.

One day when I was eight and Sis was just born, Dad and a hardline cousin named Zeki got into a serious argument about how Dad had betrayed his heritage. Zeki claimed Dad had been verraten und verkauft. Words escalated into blows, and that's when cruel cuz put the boot in.

Out of his pocket, Zeki whipped a military model neural shunt (Snowy surplus from Operation Rock the Casbah) and slapped it on Dad's neck. Quickly burrowing spineward, the boot grabbed control of Dad's motor impulses and literally forced Dad to choke himself to true-death.

Ever since I had kind of been the man of the house.

Which was why Mom was turning to me now, even though I no longer lived with her and Sis.

As I climbed the worn steps of familiar old Building Nine (referred to croak-jokingly by its residents as the Golden Horn), the slow shadow of a laser-entrained dirigible passed over me, and I sadly recalled Mom's long-unsatisfied moonbeam-dream of

visiting the Grand Canyon in person. It seemed like everyday strife-life just had a way of mind-grinding a person right down. Look how much eft and trouble I had gone through just to land this cysting lite-servo job, and how events like today's kept conspiring to put me in danger of losing it.

If only, I thought as I rode the smelly elevator upwards (the car was liberally bespotted with the glandular signatures of rival tribes and zokus), if only I could do something really uptaking to show everyone what I was capable of. Maybe then I could get some real security in my life....

Little did I know then the fate-date the near future had in store for me.

On the 44th floor I came to the family door. I could hear Mom and Charmaine yelling right through the macromolecule walls, so I didn't bother knocking but just palmed the sweat-vetter gene-screener and stepped right in.

A burst of overdue deja vu hit me. Nothing had changed in the year since I had moved on, and that meant nothing had changed since time began. My childhood Build-a-Cell kit still sat on a shelf. The aging Philips virtuality rig still sported spots of dumbpaint from an attempt at redecoration three years ago. The forever-dying orchidenia plant still clung to life.

Mom had her back to me, blocking sight of Charmaine. When Mom turned and stepped aside, I could see what had made her roughride and chide so snide.

Charmaine had added feelers to go along with her old familiar antennae. A row of itchy, twitchy buglegs running down each side of her torso. Her clothing had been grommetted to accommodate the new members.

"Oh, no, Charm," I said. "I thought you had given up on the Roaches...?"

My sister had a perez-pretty face, despite the wispy, feathery, living proteoglycan antenna-rods projecting out a good meter from her forehead, iridescent black. But now, messed up with grief, anger, fear and tears, it looked really bug-ugly.

"I'll never give up on the Roaches! I was just waiting to add more nodes until I got enough eft!"

Mom burst in. "Tell your brother how you got two thousand NU-dollars! Go ahead, tell him!"

Charmaine straightened up defiantly. "Just like you, Ma. I won it at the cats."

Mom glared at me for support. "You heard her. She stole her own mother's stake for the track – my one little luxury – and bet it all on one race. Her, jeune fille estupida, who couldn't tell a cheetah from an ocelot!"

"I won, didn't I? And I paid you back double."

"But look how you spent the rest! Mutilating your beautiful body like that!"

"It's my thorax, and I'll do what I want with it! Besides, you're one to talk! You ain't hardly no Miss Baseline Betty yourself!"

I realized that there was something different about Mom that hadn't registered in the confusion till now. She had had her chocolate complexion spotted-dotted like one of the racing cats she loved. And translucent

feline whiskers bristled around her kisser.

"Pah! My little vanity is like my memere's old-fashioned eyeshadow compared to your craziness. And besides, the belle gato is a mammal like us. But roaches –"

That was the match to Charmaine's fuse.

"Go ahead!" she exploded. "Say it! Roaches are bugs! Well, you're not insulting me by saying that. Bugs are glorious! They're not our inferiors, they're our superiors! Bugs were here long before mammals and they'll be here long after we kill ourselves off! I'm proud to be a Roach! And as soon as I get some more money, I'm gonna get a full carapace! Neurocrine and Berlex are in a price war, and shells're getting cheap as prostaglandins! Weevil has one, and it's beautiful!"

Mom wailed. "Ai-yi-yi! Damballah, Erzulie and Jesus save me from this disrespectful girl!"

All of a sudden, my legs felt like puddin'. I had heard this whole argument a hundred times before. Their life was on replay, mine was on delay. How long was I going to be trapped while these two yapped? Didn't they see I had my own probs that made my head throb? I was trying to make something of myself after a bad start, but these two fighting were ripping out my heart.

I sat down all dreary-weary in a chair and my eyes fell on a fishbowl tabletopped near there. In it swam four flaking trilobites. The sight of the watery wigglers reminded me of my job, and I shot to my feet.

"Listen, you're not going to solve anything by yelling at each other. That's no way to act for a daughter and mother. Ma, you and Charmaine both need to get your fingers off the hot buttons. What's done is done, and should be forgotten." I had a sudden inspiration. "I'm going to take Charmaine to work with me. We can talk about things, and see what we see. I'll bring her back tonight, and we'll all have a meal together."

Mom smiled. "You were always such a good boy, Corby. I knew I could count on you to talk some sense into la cucaracha here."

Charmaine stiffened. "Ma, I'm warning you –"

I grabbed Charmaine by the elbow, brushing one of her new abdominal legs, which jerked reflexively. I hustled her out the door.

"I'll make your favourite, Corby," Mom called out down the hall. "Grilled mammoth steaks!"

We were on the train heading crosstown before Charmaine would talk to me.

"Mammoth steaks!" she huffed. "I'm lucky if she nukes me a lupinovine chop!"

I felt myself relax a little, the annoying rhymes retreating into some unprobed lobe. At least Charmaine wasn't going to stick to her sullen silence. Maybe there was a chance to straighten things out.

"You've got to let up on Ma, Charm. You know she's not exactly the domestic type. And life's been hard for her since Dad died. You shouldn't block her receptors about her gambling, for instance. It's really the one pleasure she's got these days."

Charmaine stiffened, and her new abdominal additions began to wave like the legs of a stepped-on

roach. It seemed she didn't quite have full control of them yet.

"What about me? Ain't I nothing to give her some pleasure? Why can't she take some interest in me and my life, huh? She's always praising you to the skies. But me – all I get is her gleet and pus."

"Charm, there's no need to be nasty. Look, Ma likes me better because somehow, I think, I remind her of Dad. And she's proud of me because I got out of the projex. Not that this job is anything much, believe me. As for why she keeps catalyzing your leucotrinines, it's –"

"I know, I know, it's the Roaches. Well, I got news for you and Ma. I am not a larva any more, I'm an adult. And my mind is made up. The Roaches are the best thing that ever happened to me. Once a Roach, always a Roach. And pretty soon, I'm gonna be a Roach all the way! And it won't be any too soon. Because big things are gonna happen any day now, and the Roaches –"

Charmaine stopped herself.

"What? What kind of sneaky-freaky things are the Roaches up to?"

Folding all eight of her arms – two baseline and six add-ons – across her body, Charmaine clammed up, and nothing I said would get her to reveal anything further.

When the train pulled into our stop, we got in line to get off and found ourselves behind a Visible Man. The fright-sight of all his working viscera through his transparent gut-bucket made me want to hurl my cereal.

What a mayday payday this was turning out to be!

Aboveground, we stood for a zepto on the tree-green lakeshore. A tart breeze flustered our hair. Sunlight played on the clean waters of Lake Mitch. Not far from the transit stop loomed the headquarters of the Eater Corps, a subdivision of the GLB Authority. Toward this, Charm and I made our way down paulownia-shady pedpaths.

EC HQ used to be the Shedd Aquarium, back in the last century. But like all oldtime zoos and such, with the advent of splices the Shedd had quickly gone out of business. With transgenics of all types – many of them more exotic than anything nature had ever produced – visible and touchable (even, in the case of a Hedonics Plus product, beddable), to be found in street, home and store, public interest in seeing dull caged specimens had nulled out. All the retro exhibits had quickly sold their stock as raw lab material and folded. And as far as a zoo's utility as a repository of endangered species went – well, the Great Restockings had ended that use.

But the oldtime tourist diz still retained some connection to animals, which I frequently had cause to think on.

At the door I met up with one of my proxies and fellow Eater Feeders, Sharpy, who seemed in a bit of a flushed rush.

"How's Ozzie this worn morn?" I asked a bit nervously.

Sharpy's face was a mass of long drooping folds and corrugated wrinkles, like his doggie namesake.

Even when happy, he looked doomy-gloomy. And as now, when actually preoccupied, he could make a technogoth resemble a gameshow vannawhite on Pollyannamide.

"The Khan has me scared. He's just not his old apoptotic self. He's given all of us the day off to attend an official blyfest over in the Loop. Some kind of sensitivity training in how to deal with Anti-Em demonstrators. Now I ask you, would the Khan we know and detest shed a yocto-tear about the feelings of some friggin' rifkins?"

Inexplicable as Ozzie's actions were, they seemed good news for a change. At last on this crazy day, something was finally going my way, and I felt zetta-okay. Until Sharpy's next words.

"Except you. He's been asking everyone if they've seen you yet. Seems he has a special chore just for Cadet Corby."

"Mighty Ogun! Now my ass is grass, no sass!"

"Not necessarily. Remember, I told you, he's not acting like the old Khan. Maybe he'll go easy on you. But you'd better get in there soon."

"Right. Thanks for the warning, Sharp."

"No skin off my dewlaps. Hey, who's the Love Bug? Want to spend the day with me, Cricket?"

During our conversation, Charmaine had stood in bored silence, wiggling her new legs in a programmed sequence to gain greater control over them. (I hoped she was remembering to take her cecropins.) But now she bristled at Sharpy's remarks.

"Eat pyrethrum, chordate!"

"Charmaine, please. She's my little sister, Sharp, and she's not in a good mood today. I apologize for her."

"No mammal has to apologize for a Roach!"

"Put it in a vacuole, Charm. Listen, Sharpy – I'll see you later. I'd better go take my bitter meds from the head."

I hauled Charmaine along to the office of Cengiz Ozturk.

In the anteroom, I pushed Charmaine down onto the Biospherics slouch-couch. "Stay here. We haven't finished talking about the probs of our little germline yet. I'll only be a zepto – I hope."

"What am I gonna do while I wait?"

"I don't care if you count your hairs. Raster some vid, you selfish kid. Can't you tell I'm gonna catch hell?"

This rough talk – which her loving brother never used toward her – seemed to waken Charmaine to the variety of my anxiety, and she sulkily picked up a pair of retinal painters provided for waiters.

"Olivetti Eye Blasters," she sarcastically intoned. "These are shit."

The expression on my face caused Charmaine to shut up and don the glasses.

I entered the zig-zaggy light-trap to Ozturk's inner sanctum.

Cengiz Ozturk was a veteran of the Last Jihad. An officer of the secular Turkish government, he had been among the last evacuees from Istanbul during its seige by the Jihad's shahada-sicarios, and conse-

quently had caught the worst of their assault, taking a hit from a bizarre new weapon.

There used to be a basal disease called xeroderma pigmentosum. Those who had it were so sensitive to sunlight that an average day in the pre-ozone-hole sun would give them cancers and other cyto-malfunctions.

Ozturk had been hit with a designer infective agent based on this retro disease. Now it lurked ineradicable in his soma.

A few photons at the frequency of visible light impinging on his skin today would be enough to trip a cascade of death-agonists throughout his body, resulting in a yotta-painful death.

He had been med-evacked in a light-tight homeopod and installed in an null-photon underground facility, where bonestretchers and cellsmelters could investigate his condition. But in the end all that could be done for him was to adapt his vision to infrared and find him an alpha-symbland desk job.

Which had turned out to be director of the Eater Corps, my boss. And needless to say, this whole experience had left him a less-than-cheerful sort.

As I felt my way down the last zag, I braced myself for the Dow-Hughes shrink-wrap that was the final safety barrier between Ozturk and the world.

I met the bedsheet of pliable film face on and pressed ahead. I really hated this. The semiorganic film wrapped itself around me from head to toe, sealing shut, pinching off behind, more drawn from the dispenser and ready for the next entrant. Mouth- and nose-holes opened of their own accord. My use-less eyes remained hooded.

Now I was no danger. Had I been carrying a weapon, I couldn't have reached it beneath the wrap. Even if I had a flashlight in hand, ready to fire, the film would have frustrated it by invading the mechanism or reflexively immobilizing my twitchy trigger finger. Sure, there were sophisto ways around the wrap, but who really wanted to smoke an old soldier like Ozturk anyhow? The extra security was just paranoia and status-flash on his part.

I stopped just inside the door. "Uh, Captain Ozturk? It's me, Cadet Corby..."

The room was flooded with low-freak illuminating rads, and I could almost feel Ozturk sizing me up with his altered eyes as I stood here blind. What I put up with for this job! But it was still better than the projex – or so I told myself.

At last Ozturk spoke. His voice sounded funny, mechanical almost, and I could see what Sharpy had meant about his not being his old self.

"Cadet, I need you to help conduct a small experiment. You are aware that the terrorist splice known as Krazy Kat has been reported in the vicinity?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I'm very concerned that he not subvert our Eaters. Accordingly, I've redesigned their dietary leash. I'd like to run a field trial before switching over entirely, however. Make sure the NOAEL is as simulated. Please take this sample and feed it to the Rivermouth Colony."

I extended my hand slowly, so as not to trip the

wrap's freeze-reaction. Into my outstretched palm was placed a packet.

"Do you wish to dataglove the leash's new molecular structure?" Ozturk asked.

"I'm sorry, sir, I can't use datagloves. It's my disability –"

A strange satisfied tone crept in Ozturk's voice. "Oh, of course, I should have remembered. Very well, Cadet, that will be all."

I held my breath, waiting for some reprimand about being late. But it never came. I had the impression, in fact, that I now stood alone, Ozturk having disappeared into his attached living quarters. I didn't wait to get kissed or dissed, but figured I was dismissed.

Midway through the light-trap, I was freed by a mist from the shrink-wrap. Gathering up Charmaine – who of course had to complain I was interrupting her S&M vid of "Hot Purple Pain" – I signed out a Skoda Skooter and a Taligent poqetpal and got ready to carry out my assignment.

Riding north through city streets, Charmaine behind me on the saddle-seat, her pinchy insectlegs digging into my ribs as she hugged me, I pondered why Captain Ozturk had chosen me for this mission – it bugged me. Was it a prelude to promotion, a mark of my devotion? Or just sheer chance, no cause for flights of romance?

When no answer came clear, I pushed the question to the rear, and motored on.

Soon we arrived at the point on the shore opposite the Rivermouth Colony, roughly six blocks south of Oak Street Beach, where lucky franchises basked in the heat.

Charmaine and I stood on the low grocrete jetty painted with the EC insignia and reserved for official use – vehicle moorings and Eater feedings and such – and I pointed out the Eater habitat to her, some half-klick offshore.

Shading her eyes against the lake-sparkle, Charmaine said, "Wow, that's big! You know, I never bothered to come look at this before. Kinda like a New Yorker never visiting Television City. Is it made out of – rocks?"

"Stones, mud, trees, driftwood, old car parts – whatever the Eaters can scavenge from the lake. They're master builders."

There was a note of pride in my voice that was there by choice. After all these years of working with the Eaters, I had become one of their virtue-repeaters. The splices were honest, humble and dutiful. And despite naysayers, I even believed they were beautiful.

And to think that without a terrorist act, the Eaters would be fiction, not fact!

Twenty years ago, the first designer-waterweed invasion of the GLB had occurred. The initial invader had been a modified Canadian pondweed, *Elodea canadensis*, introduced into the St. Lawrence Seaway. Its repro-rate was low-mag compared to what followed: *Elodea* took a whole week to double its initial biomass. Well, the GLB eradicated by lo-tech smart-chem means the infestation of pondweed,

only to find itself attacked by an even fiercer milfoil-alligator-weed cultivar. They zapped that too, but it was just the edge of the wedge.

For next came the infamous water-hyacinth-*kariba*-weed splice.

Within days the entire GLB was declared a disaster zone of plus-minus one kilonader.

Now, a youngster like Sis, who hadn't even been born at the time of the disaster, might wonder just how much trouble a little nontoxic flowering aquatic plant could cause. Based on the training materials I'd seen, and my own toddler-memory of being taken to look at the enormous floating mats of vegetation, I'd say the trouble was yotta-nasty.

The *hykariba* (as it came to be called) doubled its numbers every two days, individual plants breaking off from their clonal parents and drifting off to colonize virgin territory. Coalescing in enormous floating rafts two meters thick in some places, the *hykariba* soon blanketed the entire GLB. The plants impeded shipping, clogged the intake pipes of industrial and drinking-water plants, and contributed to flooding by displacing watermass. As the oldest of the short-life plants began to decay, they used up available oxygen, asphyxiating fish and phytoplankton. The stench from the big finny kills was incredible. As a last insult-result, the mats were excellent breeding grounds for mosquitos.

It took bioremediation forces from across the whole Union to null the invader. Before they succeeded, the genetically identical mass of plants grew to form the largest single organism in the history of the world.

One of the weapons in the fight had been the Eaters.

Hastily but deftly morrowed out of nutria, manatee and, of course, human germlines (which is what always got the *rifkins* so upset), the *hykariba*-hungry Eaters – otherwise known as *mantrias*, *nutratees*, or *coypu-cows* – were introduced into the devastated ecosystem as fast as they could be turned out by *Inovigen* and *Prizm*, *Biocine* and *Catalytica*.

Once the crisis was over the Eaters remained, first line in the GLB's defense against future intruders. They patrolled and roamed in the waters they called home. Restrained by diet leashes, they always returned to their beaches. Where they were met by a Feeder such as yours truly, who pampered his charges with applause unduly.

"How do you get them to come?" Charmaine asked with what I hoped was unfeigned interest.

"Like this."

I took the *poqetpal* out and tapped in my private code. Then I stuck the unit underwater, where it began to broadcast its ultrasonic call.

Within minutes, the first Eater arrived.

Big Eater.

Head of the colony, Big Eater was larger by half than any other *nutratee*, and twice as smart. Befitting his leader's rank, the head bull was the only one in the colony who had the speech feach.

Gushing up out of the water like a furry brown torpedo, Big Eater sprayed us in his usual greeting, and

Charmaine squealed. Gripping the jetty with his crafty paws, he left the bulk of his body still underwater. Rivulets ran from his *coypu-cow* muzzle, off ears and jowls that were part of his special gene-puzzle.

Big Eater smiled. "Cor-by. How are you?"

I tousled the sleek oily fur. "Doing okay, Big Guy. How's the missus and all the lit-tle calves?"

"The she is good. The little ones are good. We eat. We watch for bad things. We sleep. We build. Life is full."

"Great, great, I'm glad to hear it."

Charmaine squatted down beside me. "Can – can I pet him too?"

"Sure. Big Guy, this is my sister, Charmaine."

"Char-maine, hel-lo."

I watched Sis instinctively scratch Big Eater's favourite spot, right behind his ears. She seemed to have reverted to her innocent *chrono-years*. "Oooo, he's a real teddy-weddy, yes he is..."

Unable to resist a prod, I said, "I thought you Roaches weren't keen on mammals..."

Charmaine instantly got all hard. "Humans are what we hate, the privileged ones. These poor splices – they don't bear any responsibility for what they are. We show solidarity with all downtrodden species. And someday –"

"Someday what?" Charmaine didn't answer. "You know, you're almost talking Krazy Kat-style trash. You might even get arrested for it if the wrong people heard."

Standing, Charmaine said, "I don't care. We're willing to fight for what we believe in."

Before we could argue any more, Big Eater interrupted. "Why did you call me, Cor-by?"

"Oh, right. It's time to try a new pill." I opened the packet Captain Ozturk had handed me.

Big Eater seemed puzzled. "It has not been enough days for more pills."

"I know. But this is a special pill. Protection."

"Pro-tec-tion?" Big Eater looked fierce. "Who wants to harm the pod?"

"A bad splice," I said, ignoring Charmaine's impolite snort.

Big Eater pondered. "I will get the o-thers."

He was gone with a splash, we hung in like a rash, soon they came en masse.

Now, most Eater-Feeders, lazy *CivServs* that they are, just broadcast the pills on the waters, and assume every *coypu-cow* will snatch one. They don't really care if an individual misses out and dies a nasty programmed deficiency death shortly thereafter, all haemorrhages and tachycardia. After all, they're just splices, right? You can always breed more.

I didn't buy it. I always fed my charges individually. It was my job.

So now, as Big Eater watched proudly from the sidelines – he was always the last to get his dose, insuring that all his pod were provided for first – I doled out the new pills one by one to the *mantrias* as they surfaced, gulped and disappeared, a never-ending stream of whiskered snouts.

About halfway through – 20 minutes and 50 *mantrias* – I noticed out of the corner of one eye that a young *nutratee* had approached Big Eater and was

chittering something at him. Big Eater swam up to the jetty.

Before I knew what was happening, Big Eater had knocked the remaining pills from my grasp and into the water.

"Bad pills!" Big Eater said. "Make cows swim mad."

"What? What do you mean?"

"Cows don't go home. Go to Sta-tion Eight."

Station Eight was one of the artificial islands erected in Lake Mitch to help prosecute the hykariba war. Abandoned for many years, it was nothing more than a graffiti-sprayed trysting spot, or a place for a picnic when the weather got hot.

"I don't know what to say. It wasn't supposed to work out this way –"

"Big Eater must go. Must help the sick ones."

"No, wait! We'll come with you."

I hopped onto an EC jetski. Charmaine dropped down behind me.

"Charm –"

"Forget it! You wanted me along. You're not gonna leave me behind just when things get interesting!"

Big Eater was already gone. I didn't have time to argue.

I gave the ski its codes and powered up the flown-odes. We shot off across the water like Neptune and his daughter, outpacing the remaining Eaters.

Once we were beyond the Eater construction, Station Eight appeared, a small isle dotted with some crumbling structures overgrown with vines and weeds from wind-sown seeds.

As we drew nearer, things became clearer. From a few meters offshore, this is what we saw: nutratrees lay on a old launch ramp, while around them stood figures fussing with straps and clamps.

Charmaine recognized them before I did.

"It's – they're Roaches!"

I didn't like the scene and I tried to swerve, but there came a volley of shots and I lost my nerve.

"Beach it! Now!" yelled a gun-toting Roach.

I ran the jetski aground and climbed down.

Charmaine rashly approached the hot-tempered Roach.

"Weevil – ?"

The Roach eyed us meanly with Orthoptera optics. Resplendent in his winged shell, he had us pinned like bugs with his gun barrel.

"I don't know what you're doing here, Charmaine – how you found us, or whether you're here to help or hinder us – but you can't be allowed to delay our plans. These 'vars won't stay responsive forever."

"What are you doing to them?" I demanded.

Weevil focused now on my uniform. "A CivServ boy, huh? This must be your brother, Charmaine. It seems we were right not to trust you enough to let you in on the scheme."

"What scheme?"

"These transgenics have been suborned by Krazy Kat himself. A new trope. They're running on a carefully timed set of instructions now. Each one is going to carry an explosive pack up the Chicago River. We're going to breach all the underground utility tunnels

beneath the river and flood the whole Loop. All kiber-netic maintenance will be brought to a standstill."

"But the poor Eaters..." said Charmaine.

"A few expendables in the cause of freeing their kind."

"No!" I shouted.

Charmaine tried to reason with Weevil. "It's okay to hurt the humans. They deserve it. But can't you spare the splices?"

"Too late. The plan won't tolerate changes. We have to detonate the explosives as soon as they're in place, or risk detection. And that just doesn't give the cows time to escape. And who really cares? So long as we win. Both of you now – over there, behind that wall."

Under the gun's threat it looked like our sunset. We turned to march off.

And then they came.

A coypu-cow is hardly a dolphin, but they can swim awfully fast and flow like a fountain. Out of the water the remaining loyal Eaters launched themselves up the slippery slope, each one a hundred kilos of wet flesh, that's dope. They bowled over the Roaches like a living wave, coming their human Feeder to save. Knocked the Bugs off their feet, pinning them to the wet grocrete.

I rushed that evil Weevil then, cracking his carapace with a kick and a grin. Gun in hand, I was now topman.

Down to the waterside I sped, looking for one familiar head.

"Cor-by," said Big Eater. "This is what we need pro-tec-tion from?"

"Not any more, Big Guy. More like the other way 'round."

Well, of course it was Krazy Kat himself whom I had talked to in the dark of Captain Ozturk's office. Poor Ozzie – or his corpse anyhow – had been at the interview too. The bad splice had picked me on purpose. You see:

*He knew I couldn't handle a glove,
Thought I'd be sloppy when push came to shove.
Didn't know I took pride in my work –
Made that Kat look like a yotta-jerk!*

Not many humans can claim they've been in a room with the notorious Kat and walked away, and for a while I was the metamedium darling of the hour. It seemed only natural for the EC to reward me with the Khan's job.

And as for Charmaine – well, she was naturally pretty soured on the Roaches, and the Eater Corps was now one Cadet short, and I was head of the Corps –

And you know what kind of town Chicago is.

Paul Di Filippo's long-awaited first book, *The Steampunk Trilogy* (Four Walls/Eight Windows Press), has just appeared in the USA to a rave review from *Locus*. ("For all its light-hearted funkiness and melodramatic set-ups, [it] is a serious work touching on serious themes, as well as a delight and an astonishment," wrote Gary K. Wolfe.) Paul continues to live in Lovecraft-land, Rhode Island.

from RUTLAND to the UNIVERSE

Peter F. Hamilton's third novel, *The Nano Flower*, caps a remarkable trilogy of sf detective adventures featuring Greg Mandel, psi-boosted veteran of Gulf War II. All three books combine skilful speculation with pulse-racing plots, and all are set in Hamilton's native Rutland. Now working on the second volume of a massive space opera trilogy, *Night's Dawn*, Hamilton seems poised on the brink of breaking into the sf big time.

How did you get into writing science fiction?

My first short-story sale was to *Dream*, a small-press magazine which is no longer with us. There were other small-press magazines around at the time – *The Edge*, of course, and *REM*, which bought stuff of mine and hasn't published it yet. *REM* is meant to be quarterly, but in five years only two issues have been published, and the editor keeps saying the next one is coming out soon. If it does, I shall just buy up every copy printed. The work is '88 vintage and absolutely dire. *Fear* I sold to, which was probably classified as my first professional sale. They asked for a potted biography to accompany the story,

five lines saying how old you are, where you live and so on. I couldn't think of anything else to add so I put that I was writing a novel. The line editor at Pan read the story, read this potted biography, and wrote to me asking to see the manuscript, please. I duly sent it off, and three months later I was signed up. That was the manuscript for *Mindstar Rising*.

So it was enviably easy.

When I first started going to conventions and meeting other authors and told them this happy story, I couldn't understand all the black looks I was getting. But I did have that four or five years' apprenticeship in the small-press market. I have no background in literature at all, but you could send your stories in to these editors and they would take the time to read them and send you back a critique, which was absolutely invaluable. But the small press today is dying. Where I would start today I don't know. I mean, I didn't get published in *Interzone* until after the first novel came out. Before then I'd submitted about one story every two months for three years. When I met David Pringle for the first time at a

convention, I walked up and was about to shake his hand and he took one look at my badge and said, "Ah yes, the best-known name on the *Interzone* slush-pile."

Your books are incredibly well-researched. How do you go about that?

I read *New Scientist* and have done for over a decade, so all that background technology and engineering is all up here in my head. I also get *Flight* and *Space Flight*. Specific research for the Greg Mandel books I only had to do once, for the environment and everything, which was nice. I had to look up plants, see what plants would die off after global warming, what would stay. Deciduous trees would basically die off, while pines would keep going but you won't have any new growth because pinecones need cold in order to germinate. As for crops, you look at what's being grown in Florida and you transfer it over here. Sugar cane instead of sugar beet, that sort of thing.

The Mandel books are set, by and large, in a Rutland which has been inundated by the rising tides. Did you actually sit down and work out on a map which areas would be underwater?

Oh yes. First, I set the books where I live in accordance with the old cliché, "Know what you write about." And after I started doing this, I realised what a wonderful place Rutland was for a setting. If you take Peterborough, for instance, its eastern side more or less follows the contour line, and whenever there's been any building, it's always been westward, which is up, higher ground. They just don't build the city on the Fens, so that if the water did come in to a height of about two metres, it would stop at Peterborough's eastern edge and wouldn't enter the major part of the city.

Peterborough used to be a coastal town. The Fens became a bogland approximately 500, a thousand years ago, but three thousand years ago it was sea, it was salt marsh. Then it gradually sank a bit, and then a Dutch engineer came over and started this massive drainage scheme, which reclaimed all this land. It was gradually dying down anyway, and then mankind came along and drained it mechanically, methodically, and turned into into one of Europe's most fertile areas. So my prediction isn't as far-fetched as that. It was like that three thousand years ago.

Apart from the books being – in the best sense of the word – parochial, in that they're set almost entirely in Rutland, they're very British too. There

Peter F. Hamilton

interviewed by

James Lovegrove

aren't many American characters, for example. Is that deliberate or inadvertent?

There was no conscious effort on my part to exclude America. It's just that where the books were set dictated what sort of characters were in them. When they were sold to a U.S. publisher, the only alterations the American editor asked for were inserts outlining what happened in America. He just wanted some little paragraphs – there's only about five or six – detailing for the benefit of the American readership what happened to their country during and after the Warming. That's been one of the fascinations of the books for people here, seeing a future Britain, which is very rare in sf, but the editor thought the books would go down better in the States if I could show what happened there too. Which was fine, I had no quibble with that.

American sf, with the exception of someone like Heinlein, tends to deal with anti-Establishment characters, people on the margins, and there are characters like that in the Mandel books. But at the same time, you have been accused by critics of being, shall we say, a little reactionary, a little right-wing?

Critics tend to be fairly, to use the dreaded phrase, Politically Correct – let's be lenient on them and say Politically Aware. One review of *A Quantum Murder* – in which the murder victim is called Dr Edward Kitchener – said, "The name Kitchener evokes imperial resonances." Now, if you read a book and you see the name Kitchener and it does that to you, there is no way, no how I'm ever going to convince you that the book isn't right-wing. Critics like that will always find what they're looking for, what fits their personal agendas, and once this ball has started rolling, it's very hard to stop. That same review began "Peter Hamilton has been accused of being right-wing..." which gets the accusation in without actually saying it.

The best example of why this crops up is a scene in *A Quantum Murder* where Julia Evans is at a foundation-laying ceremony and one of the workmen comes over to her and says, in effect, "Thank you very much for giving us our jobs." Now that scene, read straight like that, is extremely *noblesse oblige*. But what I was trying to do with that scene was to show that in this incredibly technological future, where most people are data-workers or designers or work in cyber-factories, there are still going to be people, no matter how advanced the technology is, who are not going to be able to master that technology;

there are still going to be carpenters and brickies. The manual labour force. And you have to take people like that into account when you're putting together a fictional world. The point I really was trying to get over was that yes, this technological future will be wonderful, but you have to think about these people who aren't going to fit in with the technology end of things. They'll benefit from it, they'll get the good medicine, the fancy gadgets, the new cars, new power systems, but you have to provide some kind of work for them. So I can



look at that scene and think, There, you see, that's a social issue, that is not the natural habitat of the right-wing writer. But someone else can come along and say, "That scene is *noblesse oblige*, that's right-wing writing." On that scene, however, I will cash in my Young Writer's Flaw token. If I was writing it now, I'd like to think that my writing style has developed, matured, whatever. It wouldn't be so crude. It was very, very crude. It's the kind of mistake young writers make. It was, if you like, a bad piece of writing.

But that scene was also inoffensive because you played it for laughs.

Oh yes, I'd like to think that though the books are quite violent in places, there's also a bit of a sense of humour in them. Come on, let's lighten up a

bit, life is not that serious. It's nice to have a bit of political background, it helps build the world, but these are first and foremost detective adventure thrillers.

It's the old thing of people confusing what you write with who you are.

I would say probably that's the most annoying thing about it. "Oh yes, Peter Hamilton, the right-winger." I shall be interested in the reviews for the third book. It's set 15 years on from the economic super-expansion of the first two, and Julia, this super-capitalist, has seen that the British economy has reached saturation point, and she's the one who's saying now is the time to consolidate. Julia is smart. Her company Event Horizon was big and had all the resources before she inherited it, but it wouldn't have continued to survive if she hadn't been smart.

But this relentless bloodhound of a PC critic will now be saying, "Ah, with *The Nano Flower* right-wing writer Peter Hamilton has decided that he's going to show that capitalism has a caring face after all, he's trying to apologise for everything that's gone before."

He would have a job, because *The Nano Flower* was actually written second and before *Mindstar Rising* was published. *A Quantum Murder* was written third. Originally there were only going to be two Greg Mandel books, *Mindstar Rising* and *The Nano Flower*, and I'd just finished a very rough draft of the latter when I read an article in *New Scientist* on quantum cosmology, and within a day I had the entire plot for *A Quantum Murder*, and you just cannot ignore a gift from the gods like that. I have few enough plot-ideas as it is.

Do you believe that wealth can really solve everything?

It can help. It depends on how you use it. Power can be defined as making decisions which affect other people's lives. One of the themes of the third book is Julia being in that position. She is responsible for thousands of human beings, and she can't escape her obligations. She has the wealth but, fortunately, she knows how to channel it. Individual wealth is all right provided it's combined with the right decision-making process, and in *The Nano Flower* Julia ultimately has to make a decision on behalf of the entire human race. She's presented with all the information, that's what the team around her is for, but in the end it's

down to her, she has to decide.

Who has influenced you in your writing?

I took more or less the standard SF route: Clarke, Heinlein, Asimov. One author whose work I do admire – certainly his work up till about the mid-1970s – is Larry Niven.

What do you read now for pleasure?

Very little, it has to be said. I don't read very much while I'm writing. Being a techno-buff, the harder edge of sf tends to attract me, though I also like Bradbury and Ballard. I'm fairly relaxed in my views of what I read.

What about non-genre fiction?

I read even less of that than genre fiction these days. I'm tending to concentrate on coffee-table type books. I'm currently slogging through Kip Thorne's *Einstein's Legacy*, which is pitched somewhere above coffee-table and below scientific papers. It's interesting but hard going for somebody like me. But it is quite rewarding when you can finally get your head around these concepts. Apart from that, Martin Amis, and Julian Barnes to a small degree.

Do you feel that mainstream authors get an undeserved proportion of the attention, especially as often they're writing stuff that lacks plot and makes up for that lack with verbal pyrotechnics?

Ignoring sf is the broadsheets' policy. Once a month we get a column summarising ten science fiction books, and that's it till the next month. I forget what the figure is, but science fiction and fantasy books account for something like 17% of all fiction titles sold. And as always, we're in the ghetto. Some people are proud of that. You know, "Get science fiction out of the mainstream and back into the ghetto where it belongs." I'm not so sure. In the *Sunday Times* there was an article with a diagram showing something like 20 mainstream authors, and each one had recently reviewed another's books.

One huge circle-jerk.

Quite how true it was I don't know, but the mainstream is very incestuous.

But also it seems that you can't get a national reputation until you leave sf and enter the mainstream. Ballard didn't get the recognition he deserved until *Empire of the Sun*. Same with Vonnegut. Aldiss, too.

I wouldn't mind trying my hand at

mainstream sometime, possibly. I have a mainstream crime thriller on file.

There might be publisher resistance.

Under my name, yes, but they might just let me get away with it.

Just as Iain Banks slips an "M." into his name for his sf work, you could drop the "F." from yours for your mainstream work.

Be nice to give it a go.

The *Nano Flower* deals with alien contact. Do you personally think they're out there? Bearing in mind Enrico Fermi's paradox that...

That if they are out there, why haven't we heard from them? I think that statistically, with all the billions of planets in the universe, there is a good chance that a recognizable form of sentient life will have evolved on some of them. The question is one of coincidence. The chance that a civilization has evolved at the same time as ours, and is at the stage of being capable of interstellar travel, and is willing to make contact with us, the chance of all these three things happening at once is considerably more remote.

Your new trilogy, *Night's Dawn*, is space opera on a truly epic scale. Does the world really need another space opera?

Well, there aren't many to start with. My favourite is the E.E. "Doc" Smith *Lensman* books, which I read when I was 13 and have no intention of reading again because I'm sure they would collapse horribly with the cynical person I am today. But I've always loved space opera, and there's very little of it about.

Why not more Greg Mandel books, though?

Certainly, Pan would have liked me to stay doing Greg, and he was an excellent start to my career, but you have, as always, got to move on. If I'd started to write two or three more, I would have been in an appalling rut. I have to tell people I haven't ruled out going back to him, but then again I'm not sure I could do it from a literary point of view, because those books are full of youthful flaws, youthful enthusiasms. I was really running out of scope with Greg's world. With the second and third books, the follow-on, you've still got the same constraints. He solves a problem in the first, so obviously you're not going to get that problem again. You move on to the next one, you've got an even smaller range of problems you can present him with for that and retain believability. I took a risk with the alien in the third,

but there wasn't much else I could do by then. In space opera, with an enormous stage of half a galaxy, you have tremendous scope for imagination. You can let rip. It was great, from my point of view, to start work on something else and to know I can do something else, to experiment with writing styles. The Mandel books are very formulaic, in that each chapter is from one person's viewpoint. I've scrapped that altogether now. You still get viewpoints, but they're mixed up, they're not one chapter per person.

There are omniscient-author bits in it, then?

Oh yes. "Data-dumps". There have to be chunks of historical information because I'm working on such a huge stage.

Could you give us a rough idea of what *Night's Dawn* is about?

A summary of thousands of pages in a mere 30 seconds? Well, it's set 600 years from now, with about 800 colonized planets, and there is a threat which emerges in volume one, *The Reality Dysfunction*, and people let this threat out and gradually become aware of it. Just about by the end of volume one they know it's there and they know it's very bad indeed. Volume two will carry that on, and then you'll have a climax of sorts, a resolution of sorts, in volume three. Hopefully it's not going to be too formulaic. Not that I want the good guys losing, all my characters being killed off, etcetera, that would be unacceptable, but I'm hoping that I can add a few twists to the standard space opera formula of You Find It, You Fight It, You Beat It.

But these are massive books. It's like having three volumes, each the length of *The Stand*, in a row, to tell one story.

If you have a society which is made up of 800 planets, and you have something which is powerful enough to threaten all these immense resources – I mean, our entire solar system is industrialized – if you have something powerful enough to threaten that, you cannot describe it in 250 pages. I follow the principals who are going to be faced with the tough job of actually combating this threat, but there's also the little people. How will it affect the average farmer? Which is important. Again, it's nice to focus on the heroes and villains but there are other people in the world as well. How does this great conflict, which is above their heads, filter down to them? It was the same with the RAF versus the Luftwaffe. How did it affect the civilians in London who actually endured the Blitz? Fighter-pilots and bomber-

pilots fighting each other, it's all very noble and you can write exciting adventure stories about them, but there are other people involved taking punishment as well.

I've often wondered about that. When a plane was shot out of the sky, it had to crash-land somewhere, maybe in somebody's back garden...

And how does it affect them? Concentrate just on the hero and just on the villain, you could do it in 250 pages, but I don't think that's fair. I think you should give people a look at the whole picture.

You've been involved in negotiations with a computer-games manufacturer. Terribly hush-hush, and I know that if you tell me about it you're going to have to kill me, but...

It's all on hold. I did some proposals for Sony, they liked the proposals, then they suddenly moved office, and they're busy moving in and getting it all together, and once they've done that they're going to get back to me, and we'll hopefully develop some of these projects.

You're not actually a computer-games player yourself, though. I have a horrible feeling that if I did sit down in front of a fully-equipped computer, I'd never get up again. I have played Doom, they made me play it in the Sony offices to show what they could do, and I didn't want to leave. It's frightening, the graphics and storylines they can build into computer games these days.

It's getting close to being a computerized movie, with the player taking a major role. But interactivity will never come into its own fully until you can develop voice interactivity. When you can shout at the characters, say, "Duck!", and they respond, then you will be fully interactive.

But there still aren't decent real-time graphics available. That's just a question of processing power. When you get down to where you can put a Cray super-computer into something the size of a Walkman, then you'll get real-time graphics, then you'll get voice interactivity. It's Clarke's Law: everything is optimistic in the short term, pessimistic in the long term. People are expecting too much too soon.

Are you a fully paid-up subscriber to the Internet? Do you surf the information superhighway?

No, I'm not. I'm a technological Luddite. My computer has one program in it, and that is a word-processing program, and I can just about handle that.

Do you think the Internet is genuinely a wave of the future, or is it just a fad?

When computers are a little more sophisticated than they are now, if they improve as much in the next 20 years as they have in the past 20, then yes, it will develop into



a very powerful economic tool, and you will get people working from home, and you will get designers sending their products down the line to automated factories, at which point a country will shift from its manual labour priorities to an intellectual output, in which the intellect will be harnessed to more or less go straight into production. That's a way off yet, but the Net will grow. At the moment it's interesting. I think "faddish" is the wrong word. People are seeing what the Net can do, but there's a long way to go yet. There's a lot of growth potential in there, some of which we can't anticipate.

There's a possibility of a Greg Mandel TV series, isn't there?

Word has gone down from ITV and the BBC that they are now receptive to science fiction, because they've suddenly realized that it's been 15 years since *Blake's 7*. God help us, and we've got the Gerry Anderson *Space Precinct* coming up, God help

us again. So this company, Diverse Productions, went round all the publishers asking what properties they had got, and Pan announced that I was one of their "properties," and so I've been teamed up with Adrian Hodges, who created Kavanagh, QC and wrote the screenplay for Tom and Viv. Between us, we are now going to produce a proposal which will go to ITV or the BBC, and hopefully one of them will finance it.

Obviously the Mandel books can't be filmed as they are. For a start, you've got the Warming to take into account. You can't have characters driving past palm trees in Rutland, unfortunately, so I've hedged about a bit. I've said of the Warming that it just creates super-storms, and instead of my fictional political parties the PSP and the New Conservatives, we've now got the collapse of European federalism. The political extremes aren't there any more. When I began writing the Mandel books in 1990, we had Kinnock and Thatcher, which were heavy influences on the sociological make-up of the books. Now we've got Major and Blair, who you can't tell apart with a magnifying glass. So the TV proposals give me a chance to update the books from that perspective, but the Mindstar Brigade and Event Horizon will of course still be there.

And the TV series might satisfy those readers who are clamouring for more Greg Mandel books, in the same way that the *Star Trek* books satisfy Trekkies who can't get enough of the TV series.

But if *Night's Dawn* fails totally, I could be sitting here in two years' time saying, "Well, I always wanted to do a fourth Mandel book!"

So what's going to happen after *Night's Dawn*?

I haven't got a clue. The end of *Night's Dawn* is probably three to four years in the future.

Are you worried about committing yourself that long to one project?

I worried at the start of it. Obviously it's a very big step for Pan to take, to buy a book that size, not to mention the fact that it's the first of a trilogy, but given that they have bought it, it's a trilogy so it's more or less commissioned to be written. A nice position for an author to be in, knowing that his next two books have already been sold. After that, God knows what'll happen. *Star Trek* books, probably!

The Gift

Stephen Bowkett

Looking back, I guess we were just ordinary kids from an ordinary town. There was no reason at all why it should have happened to us in particular.

December 17th – almost at the end of that long dark tunnel between Halloween and Christmas. All of us could see the pretty glitterlights at the end. In another week, term would be over and the holidays begun; a lovely three-week drift of time into the new year, when days and nights didn't matter, and your body and mind could, for once, follow their own whims and rhythms.

The four of us were playing out on the embankment after school one afternoon, with the sky darkening slowly all around us. Right now, it was exactly the colour of Sarah Jane Smith's eyes, which never seemed to look in my direction, but whose shade and lustre I knew so very well. In another 40 minutes it would have dimmed through amethyst and all the subtle shades of deep violet into night, and our game would be over...

The four of us – me (Ross Wale), Carl Webley, Jeff O'Connor and Duncan Smith whose nickname was Donuts, though he pretended not to know why – were playing at sliding down the north-facing bank on the skin of frost that the sun had not touched out of existence that day. Once, before my time, railway lines had run along this valley-in-miniature; and when Dad was a boy they had carried steam trains across town, over the main road (where the traffic had to stop to let them through), and right past the bottom of our garden. I used to dream of that sight on summer afternoons, and could at such times almost smell the ghostly sooty smoke in the air, and hear the shrill phantom whistlings thread their way down many forgotten years.

Now the rails were gone and the trains ploughed no more like stegosaurus through the landscape of walls and chimneys and tidy gardens, all fenced off. There was not even a trace of the bedding gravel where the sleepers used to lie – just a long furrow of grassy wasteland that the council had set aside for building; but no buildings had appeared here yet, and so we took advantage while we could of this wilderness smack in the middle of Spring Falls.

We'd all brought along our own home-made versions of sledges. Carl's was no more than a torn-off section of cardboard box – but could he fly along on it! I'd

pinched a big plastic tray from the kitchen, and scored the underside so badly on stones and thorns that I just knew Mum would throw a fit when she found out. Jeff had had the same idea, although his tray was tin, and he beat a rough and raggedy rhythm each time he clambered up the bank for another go. Duncan's sledge was rather more elaborate: a proper affair of wood with a grabstrap and runners that he'd actually treated with the stuff his dad used to wax up his skis. But for all his showing off, Dunk's sledge went no faster than my plastic tray or Carl's box fragment – and didn't we let him know it.

We'd have bursts of speeding and skimming down the bank, to land in a sprawl of bracken we'd piled up at the end of the run. The air trembled brittle with our screams and shrieks, and we laughed and joshed ourselves to exhaustion.

Then we'd rest, with the cold clenching round us like a metal fist; and we'd talk of the future and of our dreams of it – angel dreams, demon dreams: dreams of girls and glory, of being grown-up and changing the world. All candyfloss, melting to nothing really as soon as the words were in our mouths. But for those few moments on that afternoon so long ago now, they tasted good: sweet with promise.

"If only," Jeff said, staring skywards and catching a glimpse in the west of the first star out that night. It was Vega, I later learned, a summer star high overhead in August but setting early at this time of year. For summer was over now, over forever, though I never knew it until that day...

"If only I was the King, I'd put an end to misery. I'd make everybody equal and –"

"Paradox," broke in Duncan, who'd learned that word lately from Mr Buck, our English tutor. "Everybody can't be equal if only you have the power to make them so. And equal in what way? All equally good-looking or bad? All equally clever or dull?"

"If all girls looked like Sarah Jane Smith," I mused, half sad and half excited, "I wouldn't stare at Sarah any more."

"And if all boys looked like you," Carl added, attacking me in my instant of vulnerability, "no girl would ever want to get married..."

"That's so funny, Carl," I jabbed back, "that I almost smiled. And if all people everywhere had your sense of humour, we'd commit mass suicide!"

"Let it go," Jeff said, realizing his vision was ruined. "I only want folk to be happy..."

"Nothing's ever that simple," I told him. "Reality always gets in the way."

So we talked awhile about Christmas presents, and made plans to see each other over the holiday period. It was Jeff's birthday right at the year's end: that always upset him so much his parents made a special effort to give him a party, so that having just one set of presents wouldn't be so bad. He invited us all, saying that if we couldn't get a girl to come along as a partner, he'd ask some of his fans to keep us company.

We all laughed at him – thinly. Because Jeff was handsome in an easy and casual way and would

never have any trouble bending women to his will. Me – I just had to wish hard and smile nicely.

Soon we went back to sliding, four cutout shadows against the glowing sky. The noise we made, the speed we flew! We lost ourselves so much we didn't notice the new kid arriving. Duncan almost smashed into him, though, at the end of a record-breaking skim. The rest of us braked with our heels, stood up and brushed down, and stood facing this kid in a mildly hostile silence; a sort of petty territorial imperative to let him know this was our playing place, and what the hell was he doing here?

Seconds passed and it was clear the boy wasn't going to speak. Frightened probably, because he was short and skinny, a real wimp: he had hair tufted and bleached yellow like the grass on the bank, and a frayed and scruffy jacket, and grubby jeans. He was shivering slightly and his hands were jammed in his pockets.

"Wadda you want?" Carl said at last, in that rough tone he thinks makes for tough street-speak.

The kid just shrugged, looking like one of those urchins in the Dickens novels our English teacher reads to us at this time of the year. I almost expected him to produce an empty bowl and ask for more...

"Just wanted to join in – it looks like fun..."

"It is fun," Carl came back, squaring up as though the skinny kid was making some conflict out of this. "But – four sleds; one, two, three, four of us... So bad luck, squirt. Why don't you just push off?"

"Come on Carl," I remonstrated gently; kind of tentatively, because there was – something – a faint thrill in the air that put me on edge: not Carl's temper, that was just the result of it. But – *something*.

"Leave him alone. What's happened to the Christmas spirit?" I looked at the boy properly for the first time. He was about our age, but seemed younger because... I suppose because he wasn't as well nourished as we were, and his eyes – his pale, pale blue eyes – held a sort of innocence; a kicked-puppy sadness that I found endearing and infuriating at the same time.

"What's your name?" I asked, not particularly wanting to know.

"Christopher," he said, delivered with a faint smile that had no place here in this quiet abandoned embankment, here under the cold sky.

"I'm Ross. Mr Friendly there is Carl. Then there's Jeff, and old Duncan Donuts, the kid with the big bag of sweets..."

"Since you're offerin'," Jeff grinned. Duncan tutted and hauled what was left of a half-pound bag of pick 'n' mix out of his anorak pocket. We all helped ourselves to a few sweets each. The new kid took a single Mint Imperial, popped it in his mouth and conjured up that smile of his again. I guess, in his mind if not in ours, we were all friends now.

"Might as well join in," I went on, keeping it casual and light. "I mean, I'm knackered for ten minutes. You can borrow my sled if you like – but really it's an old plastic kitchen tray."

He laughed at the silly joke, laughed loud and

long as if it was the wisecrack of the year. We simply stared at him and wondered which planet he'd left to be with us here tonight.

"Thanks, Ross. Thanks, guys. Is this the bob-run?"

Before we could answer, he was off, scrambling, leaping aboard the tray-sled, whizzing down, tumbling in a bundle at the bottom. His yelps and giggles took me back to my much younger years, when God was in his heaven and all was well with the world, and Sarah Jane Smith's smile and black hair in my lustful mind's eye didn't keep me awake at nights, cursing and blessing my endless desire for her.

"He's a pinbrain," Carl declared as we watched him running the cold out of his body. "The kid's a total jerk." And the others agreed with grunts or laughter that was cruel as knives. But I held back, knowing he was something more than what we took him to be.

Christopher played for ten minutes and then staggered back to us, dragging his scuffed shoes across the stony embankment bottom. The soles flapped like dogs' tongues; his socks were grey and threadbare.

"Aw, listen, that was great! That was really brilliant." He was panting like an overworked pit-horse, but his eyes glittered more brilliantly than Vega ever did, with a light that was farther away. "Thanks," he breathed, "thanks."

"Don't mention it," Dunk said, and offered him another Mint Imperial.

Christopher beamed at us fondly, even at Carl. "Look, I'd really like to pay you back for your kindness... I really would."

"Nice pair of shoes," Carl said, putting the knife in quickly. "Hey, and that nifty shirt on your back..."

It was all over Christopher's head – or maybe beneath his contempt.

"Got any chocolate?" Jeff wondered, perhaps seriously – except anyone could see that this gypsy kid had nothing but what he stood up in.

"Sure," he replied, to my mild surprise. And then he did something that I could never understand, and that in my more cynical moments I still can't believe.

He held out his hand and produced chocolate. A Cadbury's bar which he offered to Jeff, who took it with his mouth already open, as if to eat right away.

It was done beautifully, suddenly, seamlessly. A turn of magic so smooth that none of us saw what happened, nor could detect the join between what was now and what had been a moment before.

And the world turned a fraction on its axis, and a little more light seeped out of the sky.

"Whu'?" Carl said dully – not the most intelligent response I'd ever heard. He showed his teeth in an uneasy smile, or in a silent snarl of total confusion and fear.

"You – wanted – chocolate."

"Yeah, but..."

"That was pretty neat, Chris." Jeff slapped our new friend on the back. He chuckled as though someone had waved a broken bottle-neck in front of his eyes. "I mean, stylish. How'd you do it?"

"I don't know," he replied quietly, so that I for one

wanted to hit him, wanted to beat the mystery out of him in blood and screams. "I just – can."

"What else can you do, then, my son?" Duncan pressed, thinking no doubt of two-ton bags of pick 'n' mix and swimming-pools of foaming cola. Another shrug: nonchalance yet, at this gift that turned the universe inside out and gave us a glimpse of its guts.

"Whatever you like."

"Such as?"

I wanted to say no. Panic was setting in like frost-bite, attacking my fingers and toes, my tongue and my heart. A chocolate bar I could cope with – it was hardly proof of anything: sleight of hand, explainable...

"Gimme a Christmas tree, man," Carl said with a big cheesy challenging sneer. "With plenty of lights – flashing on and off. And decked with prezzies. Go for it!"

"No," I said aloud at last, but a pitiful sound.

And too late. The air nearby was already coagulating into something more substantial: a shadowy ectoplasm shot through with rainbow gleams and glints reflected on tinsel-wrapped shapes.

These things came, just as the boy had promised, without preamble, in their entirety and perfectly formed. We all knew what a Christmas tree and wrapped parcels looked like; they were part of the familiar mental background of Yuletide, clear in our dreams. And that had something to do with it, I know now, when I am tempted to weep for lost opportunities.

Carl's cynicism was cleansed out of him in those few moments, together with – for all of us – the framework we had been taught to see around the picture that in truth went on forever. "I think, therefore I am" became "I think, therefore anything can be" in the joy of Christopher's smile and Duncan's unrestrained whoop of pure happiness in realizing that the world is what our thoughts make of it – just as it says on the plaque above the entrance to our school.

But Jeff was hanging back, stepping away from the tree with its lights that burned without electricity, and its piled gifts that had no sender who was known to him.

"I think I'd better fetch my Dad," he told us quietly, and turned and ran away into the gathering gloom. The rest of us scratched our heads and got together the courage to touch the tree and even ask Chris how the hell those fairy lights worked. He didn't know, of course, though he was happy to make as many of them as we liked...

About five minutes later we saw the flare of a flash-light away up the embankment, and Jeff's silhouette and his father's larger shadow scuffling down towards us. Chris's face was pastelled in the soft colours of his Christmas tree as Mr O'Connor grabbed a hold of his jacket and asked him sharply what the heck he thought he was playing at. I thought I saw Jeff wipe away some tears, and Carl made himself busy gathering up his sled and saying, well, he reckoned he ought to be getting back home now... Mr O'Connor was hauling Chris away, and I followed, not wanting things to

go like this; half noticing Duncan in his curiosity and greed tearing open the wrapping on one of the boxes on the ground. Angel dreams, and demon dreams...

"Ross!" Chris called, maybe realizing at last that his miracle was somehow an affront to the intelligence of the grown-up world – or had been taken as such, at least.

"Right behind you Chris!" I yelled back, and started running – distracted only briefly by doubt, as Duncan broke open his box and looked inside. And started screaming.

Things happened fast after that. We went to the O'Connors' house where Chris was told to sit down. Jeff's mum made him a mug of coffee while Mr O'Connor spent some time on the phone. Jeff and I were asked to stay around to corroborate what had happened, as far as anyone was likely to believe in the likelihood of this wonder.

Very soon, my parents arrived, and the Reverend Bright and Mayor Bailey who also owned the best butcher's shop in town... Later the police came, and Jeff and I were separated and the priest saw each of us and spoke to us for a long long time...

But this was afterwards. Right then, my heart was beating and I felt that my face was hot and red. Jeff, conversely, looked pale, and his hand trembled as he wiped at the sweat above his lip.

The Mayor asked Chris lots of questions; and the Reverend kept saying that he had to think carefully about all of this, because lies would not help anyone... Chris didn't get upset or angry. He answered simply and honestly, telling it just as it had been. He finished his coffee and asked Mrs O'Connor if he might have some more, for it was a cold night... I wondered why he didn't arrange the refill for himself.

Then there was a long silence, and the air kind of tightened up in that room. I knew what was coming: I think we all did, in our heart of hearts.

"Christopher," the Reverend Bright said, a small voice in that huge quiet. "We are going to need proof, you know, because this is very, very important. Will you please –"

"Whatever you like. It's really up to you," Chris said, so matter-of-factly the laughter nearly spilled out of me before I could stop it.

"Well, just something – small, perhaps." The priest's face was hard and passionless, his voice hesitant. But there was another gleam in the Mayor's eyes, a light that was altogether darker. I saw it there, and that's when I grew up and left my real childhood behind.

Chris opened his right hand and a rose bud lay in his palm: opened his left hand and a moth flew away, wings flickering, so that ten days later the hurricane would wind itself up in the Gulf of Mexico and devastate half of Florida... His right hand again, and there was a gold pocket watch; left hand, and a ring just like the one the Mayor was wearing.

"Holy Mother of Christ!" said Reverend Bright, an exclamation torn from the core of him, a shudder of sound.

"Something else, son," Major Bailey was urging.

"More of it – *try something more!*"

The air changed again, a deeper and subtler emotion charging it with static. It was as though what was inside our heads was no longer private property: the room whirled with unborn ghosts of things.

"No," Reverend Bright whispered, moving forward with a surge of his robes. "For God's sake, no –"

But the demon dream was alive as a larger object came into being; a stain at eye height between Christopher and me. Mr O'Connor, a cop for 20 years, gave a groan as the thing was birthed in the air and dropped to the carpet with a thud. And I thought to myself that we were not and never had been as civilized as we liked to think: not any of us. For all our machines and textbooks we were still driven by the instincts of our ancestors at the start of time, though now with an arrogance great and blind enough to challenge the workings of Creation itself.

This was the fruit of all our crooked futures, writhing there, gazing emptily through upturned eyes as the universe poured in, oblivious and uncarving in its glistening nakedness, its throat gurgling soft chaos. Years later, when he was lying in his deathbed with bowel cancer and days to live, Mr O'Connor told me that he'd recognized the monster on the floor. It had not been entirely Mayor Bailey's twisted nightmares but the imperfectly remembered image of his only child, who'd perished of pneumonia when she was only three months old...

Mr O'Connor started shouting. He grabbed Bailey around the neck and clenched until the Mayor's face

was purple. His wife dragged him off and then flurried us away and out of the room. Both Jeff and I were yelling, crying, begging to save all that we knew was about to be lost to us.

The adults threw us out and slammed the door. We ran around to the back of the house and hammered uselessly on the patio doors...

Bailey was slumped in a chair, his head in his hands. Mrs O'Connor had left. Jeff's father stood by and watched with eyes that did not condemn. He took a throwover off the armchair and hid the awful creature from sight. He would shield the truth with lies for ever more, we knew, as far as the rest of the world was concerned...

A thin moon was rising now, and the gentlest membrane of frost had covered the flagstones under our feet.

Chris never struggled – perhaps it was not part of his reason for being, to fight us – as the Reverend Bright took a cushion and, with a fevered prayer, stifled out his life.

Stephen Bowkett makes his *Interzone* debut with the above story. Under his own name, he has written a number of children's sf novels; as "Ben Leech" he is the author of a couple of adult horror novels. A Welshman, he currently lives in Leicestershire. "The Gift" first appeared in significantly different form in a Welsh small-press anthology, under the Leech pseudonym, 1994.

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MUTANT POPCORN



Ed Wood's was not on the whole a feelgood life, a fact that poses a considerable challenge to his movie biographers. The where-are-they-now trivia parade that abruptly rings down the credits on Tim Burton's biopic after the premiere of *Plan 9 from Outer Space* ("This is the one! This is the one I'll be remembered for!") acknowledges "a slow descent into alcoholism and monster nudie films": a misleadingly brisk, and flippant, cover for the pathetic saga of professional and physiological self-destruction chronicled in Rudolph Grey's puzzlingly-titled 1992 biography *Nightmare of Ecstasy*, on which Burton's *Ed Wood* is diligently but selectively based. Grey's oral history reveals a different, darker figure from the rib-ticklingly inept, angora-fixated transvestite z-movie auteur conjured by the Medved siblings and their sophomoric bad-movie cultist successors: a haunting paradigm of the ultimate Hollywood loser, whose charisma, energy, and passion for film were eroded by drink

and a fatal acceptance of compromise.

Burton's film blocks out most of this career, including both Wood's formative but ill-documented early career in carnival sideshow (as the Half-Man, Half-Woman) and his comparative financial success in the 1960s as a prolific author of pulp paperback novels. Instead, *Ed Wood* settles for following its hero through the making of his three best-remembered films, the trio of bizarre portentous quickies made with Lugosi in the mid-50s: the autobiographical transvestism movie *Glen or Glenda* (1953), the mad-doctor ghoulfest *Bride of the Monster* (1955), and the transcendently barmy UFO/zombie crossover *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1956), officially canonized in 1980 by the Medved boys as *The Worst Movie of All Time*. It's since, of course, become an article of Wood fandom to deprecate this label, and Wood's own accompanying trophy for Worst Director; there are, regrettably, far worse directors than Ed Wood, and far, far worse movies than *Plan 9*. (One

assumes from later developments that the Medveds had made no particular study of skinflicks.) But the enduring pride of *Plan 9* is that it's probably the only film that could ever wear such a title with honour, and certainly the only one to which the title has stuck.

All the same, Wood's output would hardly be interesting if it was merely incompetent. What elevates *Glen or Glenda* and *Plan 9* to their near-mythic status is the combination of exemplary cinematic hopelessness with a wildly idiosyncratic personal vision. Wood's four remembered films are like malfunctioning, brain-damaged zombie versions of Universal's monster cycle of the 30s and 40s, raised from the dead at the bidding of the new decade's nostalgia for the golden age of horror that eventually led to Ackerman's *Famous Monsters* magazine and the Hammer remakes. But "bad" is a necessary if unfortunate term of simplification for what makes these films so exhilaratingly strange: the unique repertory cast of Hollywood

bizarros; the booming, deranged dialogue ("We are all interested in the future, for that is where you and I are going to spend the rest of our lives — and remember, my friend, future events such as these will affect you in the future!"); above all, the breathless shoots and frantic corner-cutting that make ordinary canons of acceptable-minimum cinematic coherence teeter like the plywood tombstones in *Plan 9* itself.

A no-budget hyphenate extraordinary, with a heroic obtuseness to his own ineptitudes, Wood did actually enjoy a certain undeniable flair as a gifted, if completely crazed, editor — given (among other quirks best displayed in *Glen or Glenda*, the Wellesian benchmark debut from which even *Plan 9* marks a technical decline) to cutting swathes of other people's footage into his movies with a flimsy dubbing of music, narration, or dialogue. ("If I had the chance," says Burton's wistful Eddie early on, "I could make an entire movie from this stock footage...") And what the films lose in chuckle value after the first couple of viewings, they win back in other kinds of more surprising resonance through their very oddness: minimalism as expressionism, cloth-eared dialogue as surreal poetry, free-associating narrative as childlike, primeval dream-logic.

Ed Wood makes an honorable, if at times unexpectedly bland, attempt at merging both interpretations of Wood's career within the formal and generic conventions of a mainstream Hollywood biopic. Indeed, its central gag is the elegant deconstruction of the biopic genre by delicately and sympathetically heroizing a great American loser; and yet its strength — though also its ultimate limitation — lies in its refusal to be merely satiric, its insistence on keeping Wood's life an open text. Perhaps in recollection of *Glen or Glenda*'s ranting prologue ("You are the public — judge ye not!"), Burton's film takes pains not to be seen as judgmental, and instead to throw the burden of interpretation back on the viewer. "I'm the only person in town who doesn't judge people," says Ed reasonably; "if I did, I wouldn't have any friends." This is certainly true to the biographical spirit of Grey's original book, which eschewed narrative entirely in favour of a paste-up of interviews — resulting in a portrait fundamentally polyphonic, contradictory, and elusive, with Wood visible only as an enigmatic montage of snapshots that never quite fit together, and several vital parts of the jigsaw (such as the number of Wood's marriages, and the fate of his putative daughter) left tantalizingly incomplete.

The trouble is that real life can't be



Martin Landau as Bela Lugosi and Johnny Depp as Edward D. Wood Jr. in 'Ed Wood'

relied on to be as comfortably non-judgmental as movies. While *Ed Wood* does a nice job of confronting the viewer with the full ghastly implication of the conventional Hollywood fortune-cookie wisdom about believing in yourself and remaining true to your dream, the fact is that Grey's original chronicle of EW's subsequent career as speed-typing exploitation novelist, occasional hardcore director, and self-destructive alcoholic is a devastatingly unfunny narrative of what happens in reality to those who buy the myth and pursue unconventional dreams without the vital spark of conventional talent. *Ed Wood* alludes to this sequel only by proxy, in Martin Landau's film-stealing support as the washed-up,

addicted Lugosi, and to a lesser extent in the heavy but not altogether impertinent parallels with Welles's struggles and decline. Instead, the weight of ambivalence confines itself to the blander territory of evaluating Wood's work in movies — making few bones about the merits of the pictures themselves, but encouraging us to admire Wood's indomitable faith in his creative mission, his courageous indifference to ridicule, and his positively heroic persistence in the face of rejection. (As it happens, this was more-or-less exactly the line taken by a remarkably solemn article on William Topaz McGonagall in my childhood volume of illustrated lives of the great Scots, which may account for some of my sense of disappointment at the modesty of *Ed Wood*'s analysis.) And in the process, the darker strands of the story are quietly plucked: Wood was, for example, already drinking heavily during the making of these early films, a crucial background detail entirely suppressed by the movie.

Burton's involvement has clearly been determinative here. Unlike, one would imagine, Michael Lehmann (for whom the script was originally developed), Burton makes no secret of identifying vigorously with Wood — whose relationship with Lugosi has become an obvious cipher for Burton's own with Vincent Price, and whose struggles for creative control with prosaically-minded producers enact Burton's own survival struggles as a maker of personal, vision-led films in a big-investment studio environment. So Wood himself is remoulded as the familiar Tim Burton hero: a dark and misappreciated visionary haunted by

Patricia Arquette as Kathy O'Hara and Johnny Depp as Edward D. Wood Jr. in 'Ed Wood'



his apartness from ordinary humanity, and whose quest for love is a painful counterpart to his struggle for acceptance in a small-minded, allophobic world. But the disappointment is that Wood is like *Scissorhands* on Prozac: Burton's most upbeat film since *Pee-Wee's Big Adventure*, as well as his most understated and comparatively conventional, and while it's nice to see a great fantasist sneaking out of his pigeonhole, one can't help thinking that the subject might have been still more acutely served by a slightly more surrealized and nightmarish touch.

Still, the writers have made an honorable shot of shaping an at least superficially traditional biopic from the dauntingly shapeless and uncooperative material. The main structural device, and the one serious departure from the record, is the rewriting of Wood's complex romantic life around a simplistic binary succession: between Dolores Fuller (Wood's leading lady from *Glen* to *Plan 9*, who left him over the angora sweaters for a second career as a Nashville songwriter) and his devoted last wife Kathy O'Hara Everett (who tolerated the tv addiction and hung

on to him unto a sad and sodden death). While this conveniently reframes the shapeless story on a neat template of boy-loses-girl, boy-meets-better-girl, it most inconveniently demands not only the deletion of Wood's short-lived marriage to Norma McCarty in between, but – less forgivably – the elimination of all hint of Fuller's participation in *Plan 9*, where her astonishing planklike performance rivals that in *Glen or Glenda* as the supreme achievement of an extraordinary player's career.

Other than this, most of the episodes are faithful fictionalizations of anecdotes from the book's interviewees, neatly dramatized and cunningly adapted to the demands of form. A serviceable succession of invented episodes introduces and assembles Wood's extraordinary gang of movie irregulars – Lugosi, horror b-monster Tor Johnson, tv psychic Criswell, waistless Elvira-prototype Vampira, and a host of low-rent drag queens and starlets – and there's a fair attempt at fitting a coherent emotional curve to Lugosi's death and its subsequent redemption in the beyond-the-grave triumph that is *Plan 9*. In the final act, especially, biopic tropes are deployed with near-

parodic fidelity to template, as our hero experiences a crisis of doubt on the set, followed by an obligatory heartwarming reaffirmation scene as he meets his idol Orson Welles in a bar and is inspiringly told: "Visions are worth fighting for. You can't let other people write your dreams." (Orson also, however, unless I misheard, seems to lay puzzling claim to authorship of *The Killing*; it would be reassuring to feel there's some point to this.) And though Johnny Depp's relentlessly boyish and bouncy reconstruction of the man himself is anything but convincing, casting and makeup of *Addams Family* virtuosity does a delicious job of replicating Wood's unique sideshow entourage of sexual and media weirdoes, while sets and shots from the original movies are recrafted with affectionate precision. It is, of course, in the end just a film about film, made by and for the irredeemably anoraked, and its commercial bellyflop at the US box office is as unsurprising as its critical overpraise. But it's a beautifully-crafted tribute to a great sf-movie icon who deserves a more complex reward than our innocently derisive laughter. Just be sure to watch the film *before* you read the life.

Nick Lowe



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Time Travel Time Travel Blues

Neil Jones

It's 10.23 by my digital watch, although from the way the sun is slanting through those treetops it's well after lunchtime here. And I – Lizzie Smith – am sitting talking into my minicorder, trying to keep my spirits up.

The *Tempus Fugit* is a write-off. If I had it back in the garage, I'm sure I could fix it, but here with only a set of screwdrivers, a wrench and my soldering gun, it's hopeless. I'm stranded.

According to the chronometer, this is 1595 – late Elizabethan England. But after all the shaking around it got on that nightmare ride down here, it could easily be out by as much as a century either way.

There's no way I can tell. I'm surrounded by trees, as tightly-packed as commuters on a rush-hour tube.

How am I going to get home? Who's going to pick up Sarah and Amy from school? If I didn't need to keep at least one eye on this forest, I'd just let go and have a really good cry.

12.14 digital. I've got a few minutes spare, so chance for an update.

Well, there I was, sitting with my back against the *Tempus*, feeling really sorry for myself when, from right behind me, there was a sound like a pistol shot.

I think I jumped a foot in the air. Heart pounding, I got myself behind the nearest treetrunk. Then the sound came again. It was a branch cracking, I realized. More sounds – rustlings, crunchings – and then I glimpsed a dark shape. A man, and coming in my direction.

The only weapon to hand was the wrench, lying on the ground beside me. I bent down and grabbed it.

The man pushed through the trees; he was tall, dark-haired, clean-shaven, dressed in dark blue – and he didn't look anything like Sir Walter Raleigh.

At least his expression seemed genial enough. Reluctantly, keeping a very firm grip on the wrench, I stepped out into view.

He saw me at once, smiled, waved, and continued towards me.

What on earth was I going to say to him? I tried to dredge up the Shakespeare I'd done at school and, when he was practically in front of me, sang out, "And marry sir, good morrow."

He raised one hand in a breezy salute. "And a very good morning to you, miss," he replied in flawless Oxford English. "Having a spot of trouble with your time-machine?"

My mouth and eyes must have formed O-shapes of pure amazement. "You speak English?" I stammered. "I mean, 20th century English?"

One dark eyebrow went up. "Yes." His voice was deep and mellow. "Or any other language you prefer."

It only took me a second or so to come to the obvious conclusion. "Then you're a time-traveller? Like me?"

Both eyebrows lifted this time. "Well of course, miss. Patrolman Michael White at your service."

"Michael White?" I repeated in astonishment.

"Isn't that analogue acceptable? Just a sec – the computer's been acting up a bit today." His eyes

shifted, as if he was listening to an internal voice. "Sorry," he went on, his accent shifting to mid-Atlantic, "That's Patrolperson. Call me Michael."

I couldn't help myself: I burst out laughing. The nightmare tumble through time, my useless attempts to repair the *Tempus*, this sinister forest, all got shoved aside. This was just preposterous.

When I got myself back under control, I gave the patiently waiting Patrolperson White a closer inspection. Both his voice and his height had registered before, but now I took in the rest of the package: muscular, but not *too* muscular, just enough to fill out the blue tracksuit he was wearing; warm blue eyes; and film-star good looks.

Which only confirmed that this was some sort of hallucination – or a dream. Any minute now, I would be waking up – *all* the way up – back in my own time and my own bed with the girls howling for their breakfast.

In the meantime, I decided to just go with the flow.

"So – Michael," I said to this absurdly attractive figment of my imagination, "you're some sort of – policeman, is that right?"

That produced a grin. "Not me. I only repair time-machines."

"I see. And you just happened to be passing and thought you'd see if I could do with some help?"

"All part of the service, madam."

"Oh, call me Lizzie, please," I purred.

"Well, yes – Lizzie – if you insist. Now, if you'd tell me –"

"By the way," I interrupted, "where's your time-machine?"

"Right here." He patted a bright red patch on one well-developed pectoral.

I beamed at him. "Of course! Silly of me not to notice."

"Anyway, Lizzie," he went on firmly, "about *your* time-machine – what exactly's wrong with it?"

Now that was an altogether reasonable question. So reasonable it shifted my thoughts straight back to the moment I'd put the *Tempus* into past-gear. I still couldn't understand what had gone wrong. It should have functioned perfectly after all the checks I'd run. But I had barely gone a week into the past, when that ominous thumping noise had started and the *Tempus* had begun to vibrate.

I'd switched the engine off immediately, of course, but the time-shunt wouldn't shut down.

Through the windscreen all I could see was blank grey fog swirling by, like a Hammer film-set of Victorian London. I could smell burning in the air – and the chronometer was tearing back through the calendar. The thumping had turned into an appalling racket and the *Tempus* was shaking so hard I could feel rivets popping – I expected it to fly apart around me at any second.

The keypad controls were useless; half the circuits had fused. I hadn't had time to panic – so I'd grabbed a handful of cables and tugged hard instead.

And ended up here.

I stared at all the trees that hemmed us in. A

breeze was whispering through the leaves, stirring the patterns of light and shadow on the forest floor. This place felt real, all too real.

And so, I realized with a jolt, did Michael White.

In which case I really was stuck hundreds of years in the past with a man from who-knew-when in the future.

"You know," I said at length, desperate for something, anything, to say to him, "I'd no idea Clapham had ever been so – *rural*."

His eyebrow arched again. "Clapham?"

"It's a part of south London," I told him tightly. "It's where I live."

"London. That's the capital of a political entity called the Unified Kingdoms, isn't it?" he said. "Actually though, this is the northern part of what you'd call France."

I blinked. The spatial co-ordinates were supposed to have stayed constant. This godforsaken forest was where my garage ought to be, 400 or so years from now.

"It sounds to me," he continued, "as if you might have run into some temporal turbulence."

A chill tiptoed down my spine. If I'd shifted in space as well as time, then how reliable were my instruments?

"Michael – when exactly are we?"

"In the form of reckoning you use, Lizzie, this is 2.27 pm on Wednesday, the 12th of June in the year 23 BC. This area is currently part of a political macro-unit known as the Roman Empire."

The chill reached my stomach. To be stranded in Shakespeare's time had seemed appalling enough, but at least I could have pretended to follow the plays.

Could this man *really* be from some time-machine breakdown service?

"Michael, you said you repair – time-machines." I gestured towards the *Tempus*, realized I still had the wrench in my hand, and hurriedly shoved it into my jeans pocket. "I wonder if you'd mind –?"

"Lizzie, I'd be delighted."

"I don't recognise this model, Lizzie," he said as I raised the buckled bonnet.

"No?" I said.

The mini was a real mess. The tyres were shredded; the windscreen had a nasty crack in it; the red paintwork was a mass of scratches – and there were dents all over the sides and the roof. Big ones. I was lucky to be alive.

Michael studied the engine, his eyes getting steadily rounder. "Well," he commented with a wry grin, "this is the first time I've come across a time machine powered by fossil fuels."

He went around to the driver's side and wrenched the door open. Wrinkling his nose at the smell of charred insulation, he leaned forward to look inside. Naturally, my main concern at that moment was whether he could get the *Tempus* fixed. Still, I couldn't help noticing what an extremely nice bum he had.

Easing himself into the driver's seat, he flexed his hand and what looked to be a hair-dryer suddenly

appeared in it. He pointed it at the panel; light streamed from it, buttons clicked, and music snapped on.

"Hmm," he said appreciatively. "What's that?"

"The Beatles," I told him. "Penny Lane."

Mood music: I'd decided on 1967 for my first trip into the past – 9.30 am on Saturday the 26th of August, 1967, to be exact. Technically, it would have been my second visit, but the first time through I'd been in a delivery room.

I'd really been looking forward to doing the Sixties. What I'd planned was a visit to the boutiques in the King's Road, a leisurely lunch, a little more sightseeing in Carnaby Street, *Oliver!* in the evening, and *then* back to 1999 to collect the girls from school.

It had all seemed such a wonderful idea at the time. I still couldn't work out why the *Tempus* had let me down. According to all my calculations, it should have been safer than travelling by bus.

Michael was giving the panel a very doubtful look. "What exactly do these controls do?"

"I'd better show you," I offered. "Move over." I squeezed in beside him. "The engine provides the power. And this keypad," I patted the one I'd fitted where the driving wheel used to be, "controls the time-shunt behind you."

We both turned at the same time and bumped against each other. The contact sent a warm tingle through me. We chorused our apologies. Michael turned his attention to the shunt. Minutes went by. A look of intense concentration came onto his face and he made various passes of the hair-dryer while I just sat watching.

Finally, his brow well-furrowed, he asked: "Lizzie, who built this?"

"I did," I told him.

"You mean – alone?"

No, I felt like saying, *actually it was a team of mutant male nuclear physicists, I only made the tea*. Instead I replied evenly, "That's right."

"Well," he said, "I'm truly impressed."

I'd been bracing myself for something sarcastic so it took me a second or so to realize he was being absolutely serious.

And then, frankly, I basked. I'd cannibalized clapped-out computers, and scavenged all sorts of other components from just about anywhere I could, including the local tip. And the *Tempus* had done what I'd designed it to do: bring me back into the past.

Clearly there were one or two problems still to be ironed out.

"Can you fix it?" I asked.

Michael's head rocked from side to side, as if he were teasing out the technical problems, one by one.

"Yes," he announced solemnly – and then flashed me a grin. "But it's going to take a little longer than usual."

As I let out a long, slow breath and leaned back in the seat, he went on, "First of all though, I'll need your membership number."

Suddenly I was sitting up straight again. "Membership of what?"

"The Trans Temporal Travellers Organization."

Several seconds went by before I snapped my fingers and said airily, "Oh *that!*" I began rooting around in my handbag. "Now where did I put it?" After a few seconds of this, I gave him a flustered look. "It's here somewhere. Why don't you just get started on the repairs while I look for it?"

"I've got to have it first. Strictly speaking, I'm not even supposed to *touch* your vehicle until I've seen it."

I closed my handbag. "I think I may have gone and left it at home."

He sighed. "Lizzie, you aren't actually a member at all, are you?"

"No," I admitted finally. "Can I join now? On the spot?"

"That depends. What sort of inter-temporal credit arrangement do you have?"

My heart sank. "I don't suppose I could just write you an IOU?"

"No way. Time Central would have a fit."

I'd run out of arguments. Frankly, I was so desperate by then that, if I'd ever worked out how to bat my eyelashes, I'd have batted them for all they were worth. As it was, I just gave him my look of mute appeal.

He kneaded his chin, letting his gaze go from me to the time-shunt and back again, keeping up the suspense.

At last he said, "Seeing as I'm already here..."

14.07 digital. The story so far.

While Michael got on with the repairs, I made myself comfy. I'd offered to help, of course, but he'd insisted. And to tell the truth, it was a relief just to sit in the sunshine, my back against an oak tree, feeling warm and relaxed and, for the first time since I'd crashlanded in the past, *safe*. Even in the worst-case scenario – if the *Tempus* was beyond repair – I was sure that Michael would drop me off in 1999. On his way home, so to speak.

In between talking into my minicorder, I watched him at work out of the corner of my eye. Besides being the most attractive man I'd met in a very long time, he was being incredibly sweet.

I really fancied him – but once he'd repaired my time-machine, he'd be off and I'd never set eyes on him again. Unless... he seemed fascinated by the *Tempus*. Why not just invite him back to Clapham for coffee – and the chance to see where and how I'd put it together?

I hadn't chatted anyone up for ages. But, if I handled things smoothly, coffee could become dinner – and, given these particular circumstances, Michael might even end up spending the night...

I had a really first-class fantasy underway, when a deep, chocolatey voice called out, "Lizzie."

My eyes opened and I found Michael kneeling beside me.

"Sorry to wake you," he said, "but perhaps you can help me after all."

"I'd be happy to," I said, rather pleased. Taking his hand – he had a strong, warm grip – I let him pull

me to my feet.

"It's your..." He hesitated, his eyes shifting as if the word he was expecting hadn't been delivered. "Your future-direction-steering system," he went on, "I can't find it."

"I haven't got one," I told him, surprised. I'd been intending to go back the same way I'd travelled down here: put the *Tempus* into the right gear – reverse – and keep my foot down until I was back in the garage. After all, there were only two directions a time-machine could go in.

Michael groaned. "Lizzie, what were you going to do when you came to the branchpoints?"

"What's a branchpoint?" I asked, alarm stirring in my stomach.

"I think it'll be easier if I show you."

A three-dimensional image formed in the air in front of us. It was a tangle of glowing green lines, lots and lots of them, spreading out from each other, like a wildly overgrown bush.

"This is a chronotree," Michael explained, "a sort of temporal map. The branchpoints are where the time continuum forks. They're moments when history hangs in the balance, when it could go two different ways. And does. So the timeline divides."

Seconds slid by while that sunk in. Presently, I said in a very quiet voice: "I see."

And I did; I'd read enough science fiction. What-if worlds. What if the other side had come first in the Crusades, or World War II, or the Falklands? What if Columbus had capsized in mid-Atlantic? What if high heels had never been invented? Different futures. Lots of them.

Time went in considerably more than two directions. I knew the theory, of course, but frankly I'd always considered it pretty far-fetched.

"So," I said, "travelling into the past is the easy part?"

He gave an emphatic nod. "Very much so. Because all the timelines are converging towards the Big Bang. You can get a little temporal turbulence as you pass the branchpoints – that's what you ran into, Lizzie – but otherwise it's straightforward enough. Going into the future, though, you encounter *two* equally real futures at every branchpoint you come to. One of them takes you home, the other is a wrong turning. And Lizzie – without a steering system, you can't choose between them!"

"Just how many of these branchpoints, these possible wrong turnings, are there between here and –" I hesitated, still struggling to come to grips with this daunting new time continuum – "*my* 1999?"

Michael pursed his lips. "Oh, millions."

That put it in perspective, a lot more perspective than I'd bargained for: the *Tempus* had about as much chance of reaching 1999 as I had of winning the National Lottery.

An hour or so before, all this might have turned me to jelly, but with Michael on hand I felt relatively relaxed about it. I decided I'd actually been extremely *lucky* to break down. Otherwise, once I'd done my Sixties sightseeing, I'd have fast-forwarded the *Tempus* and god knows when I'd have ended up.

"So," I enquired, just to make sure, "you can't fix my time-machine?"

"Not a chance."

Which meant plan B, I thought serenely. And Michael taking me home had very definite advantages.

Then the Big Problem unfolded and hit me smack in the face. Michael didn't come from the future at all – at least not *my* future. My gaze went back to the maze of green branches in front of me. What would taking me home mean to him? The equivalent of a trip from Clapham to, say, Brighton? – or would Hong Kong be nearer the mark?

Find out, Lizzie, I thought, as panic began seeping back. Fast. "Michael," I began tentatively, "would there be any chance of –"

"– of me taking you back to your home-era," he completed. "It's against the regulations, of course. But –" he grinned at me, he had an absolutely charming grin – "to hell with them. I'm not leaving you stranded here."

"Michael, thank you," I breathed in a wave of gratitude. "It's really kind of you. It's..." Before my nerve could fail, I rushed on, "You know, while you're there, you could have a look round my gar – laboratory and see how I put the *Tempus* together."

His face lit up. "That would be marvellous!"

A strawberry-red blob blinked into view on one green branch. "That's our current position," Michael said. "Now, if you give me the directions to your home-era, Lizzie, the computer will pinpoint it on the tree."

I stared at the chronotree. How did you give directions on a road-map made out of green spaghetti?

Michael flashed me an encouraging smile. "Just tell me about it. Any sort of background data will do – famous people, important events, that sort of thing."

Important, I thought. The day the twins were born. The day I'd woken with the configuration for the time-shunt clear in my mind.

"There's Queen Elizabeth," I ventured presently. "I mean, the *second* one! The Beatles. God no, too early – that's where I was *going*! The end of the Cold War," I went on. "The break-up of the Soviet Union." Suddenly it was all starting to flow. "The break-up of the USA. The break-up of –"

"OK, Lizzie," Michael called out. "The computer's got you placed now." The chronotree was executing a slow stately turn, like a tipsy ballerina.

Michael's expression suddenly darkened. I leaned closer. "Is there a problem?"

"Yes," he said in a tight voice, "your era is further away than I'd thought. A *lot* further! Right the other side of the tree." He spread his hands. "My time-machine doesn't have the lateral range to reach there, not and get back, too."

He gestured and the chronotree vanished. "There's nothing else for it," he said. "I'll just have to take you back with me – to Time Central."

I breathed out again. "And – I can get a ride home from there, can I?"

"Yes. It'll take a while to get the red tape sorted out, of course. There're all sorts of regulations –"

immigration, emigration, temporal contamination, that sort of thing. Central's the hub of a major temporal state, after all," he added defensively. "We have to take precautions."

"So – how long is it likely to take?"

He shrugged. "It depends. A couple of years perhaps. Certainly not more than a decade, tops."

I swallowed.

"Lizzie, there's no alternative. – And Central's an amazing place. You'll love it." He looked down, straight into my eyes, and went on in a softer voice, "I'd be very glad to show you around. If you'd let me, that is."

Looking up into those thick-lashed blue eyes, I felt tempted. It wasn't as if I had anything much to go back to in 1999. My freelance computer programming had tapered into outright unemployment, I was months behind on the mortgage and the bills were piling up on the hall carpet.

Temptation fought it out for almost a full half-second before the image of two small girls, satchels over their shoulders, swept it away.

"Michael, I can't. I've got to get home. I've got responsibilities." I fished Sarah and Amy's photograph out of my handbag.

"They both look a lot like you, Lizzie," he said after a moment. "I didn't realize you had... a family."

"Just the twins," I said, happy to put the record straight. "I'm divorced. – But, Michael, I am determined to get back to them."

"Of course you are – but don't forget this is *time* travel. It won't matter how long you have to stay at Central – you can still return to your children – to the *exact* moment you left them, in fact. They'll never even know you've been away."

"Maybe *they* won't," I shot back, "but *I* will."

I'd never intended to get pregnant, much less become a single mother, but I'd ended up with Sarah and Amy anyway, and – I really loved those two girls. A day away from them would have been fine, an entire weekend heaven. But years? – a *decade*? Absolutely not!

Michael ran a hand through his hair. "All right then," he said, accepting my mind was made up. "There must be something I can come up with."

As he spoke, the red patch on his chest floated off into the air. Its colour changed briefly to orange, then flickered through the rest of the spectrum, before finally settling on light-bulb grey. At the same time, it puffed itself out into a sphere the size and shape of a golfball.

"What the hell's that?" I yelled.

"Just my time-machine," Michael said absently.

The golfball grew – alarmingly fast – only stopping when it was as big as my garden shed.

"I'm just going to check a few things out," he said. "Don't go away." Stepping forward, his body went through the grey hull as if it were no more substantial than cigarette smoke.

"Michael!" I called out, much too late: he was gone.

My one and only hope of getting home again and I'd let him get away. Not without a fight, I thought, leaping after him, straight towards the golfball.

I bounced off it, getting a nasty crack on my elbow in the process.

16.12 digital. Update.

Keeping my eyes fixed on the giant golfball, I waited, going through panic and sinking on down towards despair, expecting it to simply disappear at any instant, taking Michael with it.

Birds chirped at each other in the treetops; the air was full of fresh green smells. But if anything the forest around me felt even creepier than it had before. And now all that greenery kept reminding me of the chronotree and the tangle of timelines that stretched between me and Clapham.

What I wanted was for the golfball to open up again and Michael to whisk me back to 1999 and the girls. If he wanted to stay for coffee, fine. But right then I'd have settled for just the ride home.

The minutes went digitally by, one by one, and the golfball stayed where it was. So, finally, I got the minicorder out and began talking into it again. Then, just as I was hitting the off-switch, I caught a movement out of the corner of my eye, and whirled round to see Michael come ghost-stepping back through the golfball's hull.

"Right, Lizzie," he said, as if he'd only been gone a minute or two rather than the best part of an hour, "I've got something." He held up a warning hand. "It's not ideal, but it's the best I could come up with."

Behind him, the golfball doubled its size in the blink of an eye. Branches that weren't fast enough to get out of the way were snapped off mercilessly. What was truly scary, though, was the way it came slithering straight at us.

I cried out and tried to duck aside, but Michael took hold of my arm and hung on.

"Lizzie," he said, "it's –"

An implacable grey surface loomed above me. Solid: I still had the bruise. I raised my free arm in front of my face and my eyes slammed shut.

"– all right."

Cautiously, realizing as each new second went by that I had not been crushed, battered, or even felt so much as a tingle, I opened an eye.

We were inside the golfball, standing in a mostly spherical space – the floor was flat – done out in dreadful pastel colours. I prodded the hull; there wasn't a bit of give in it. I turned right around, looking for control consoles, computer banks, video screens, that sort of thing. But there weren't any; it was just bare golfball.

"This is all state-of-the-art," Michael informed me proudly as something drifted through the hull and settled on the deck beside us: the *Tempus*.

"Now," he said, "it was that island to the north of here you came from, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

The chronotree reappeared, a second strawberry gleaming on one green branch.

"That's the furthest I can take you," Michael went on. "The year, in your reckoning, is... 1066. A battle. The computer's still searching for the name –"

"Hastings," I supplied.

"You know it then?"

"Sort of."

"Good. Now we'd better get going. – Sorry about the rush," he added apologetically, "but I had Central onto me a few minutes ago. There are calls stacked up. I've spent longer here than I expected."

Just as I was about to ask him what was going to happen when we got to 1066, several strips of pastel decor began strobing softly, as if in warning. Expecting a buffeting to match the one I'd had coming down in the *Tempus*, I braced myself by grabbing the nearest solid object. Thinking back, I could easily have gone for the *Tempus*; after all, I was standing right beside it. Instead I chose Michael. I got both hands around his waist and hung on tight.

Several seconds passed, with absolutely no sensation of motion at all.

"Uh, sorry," I muttered, more or less into Michael's shoulder.

But he didn't seem to mind at all. In fact, his arms had gone around me. Then he kissed me. Extremely well, as a matter of fact.

I kissed him right back.

"Lizzie, we're here," Michael murmured a while later. "1066. Somewhere over there," he gestured vaguely with his chin, "is where that battle, whatever it's called –"

"Hastings."

"– is going to take place."

He waved a hand at the *Tempus* and the car radio began bleeping furiously. "That's the signaller. It'll sound when another time-traveller is passing by – and signal them you need assistance. Provided they're headed in the right direction, you can ask them to give you a ride on, then wait until the next one turns up. And so on. It may take a few hours, subjectively speaking, but you'll get home all right."

I stared at him. "You mean – *hitchhike*?"

"I suppose that's the best term for it." He looked embarrassed. "I said it wasn't ideal. But don't worry, Lizzie. Time-travellers are a helpful lot, by and large. Plus I've installed some other devices set to respond to your voice command: a defence capability to sort out any hostile locals, and a nutrigenerator which –"

"And this was the best plan you could come up with, was it, Michael?" I demanded.

"I'm afraid so, Lizzie."

Hastings. Barely halfway to 1999. Still, at least it sounded more like home than some nameless Roman forest.

"In that case," I said finally, "it'll just have to sodding well do."

The golfball seemed to flex, like a tent coming down, and I shut my eyes automatically. By the time I opened them again, it had eased itself out from around us, and was hovering off to one side – leaving me, Michael and the *Tempus* back on solid ground again.

Ground that had trees all around. Another forest, I realized, practically a carbon-copy of the last one,

with sunlight filtering down through the leaves.

"Lizzie, it's not too late to change your mind," Michael urged. "Come back to Central with me."

I shook my head; I *had* to get home to the twins. I couldn't spend years away from them. Still, I was glad he'd asked a second time. It was touching. Flattering, too.

"Then," said Michael, "this is goodbye."

Both of us leaned forward and two sets of lips connected once again.

"You're a – a most unusual person, Lizzie," he murmured, nuzzling my ear. "One day, somehow, I'm going to get to your 1999 and look you up." He gave a chuckle. "And I'd really love to see that laboratory of yours, too."

"You do that," I sniffed.

Michael let go of me and took a slow step backwards, through the golfball's grey hull. "Goodbye, Lizzie."

I was blowing him a kiss when he completely ruined his exit by stopping, head and one arm poking out of the golfball's side, and saying, "By the way, you were wrong about the name of the battle. It wasn't Hastings. The computer's just run it down. Brighthelm. The Battle of Brighthelm."

This was not, I felt, the moment to get fussy about military history. "I don't think –"

"Yes. 1066. The Moslem Invasion of Britain."

With a final wave, Michael disappeared. And the air rushing into the cavity left by his departing golfball swallowed up my scream.

18.06 digital. I suppose I'd better keep this log up to date.

Well, I'm not going to starve. I've just persuaded the nutrigenerator to dish up a passable cheese omelette. Wonder if it'll do Mars bars?

There hasn't been a peep out of that signaller, though. How long have I got before I sail past the Battle of Brighthelm branchpoint? And which side is going to win? Or rather, since in this spaghetti-time continuum they *both* will, which version of victory will I be shunted onto?

God. I hate to admit it, but I'm feeling really miserable. I think I'll try for that Mars bar now.

23.47 digital.

Michael's signaller is bleeping for all it's worth – and those trees off to my left are stirring. That's an incoming time-machine!

I don't know how far Michael took me from the route that leads back to *my* 1999, but if there's the chance of a ride, even a couple of centuries pastwards would be a help. I just hope this one's going in the right direction!

Tell you all about it later. Meanwhile, where did I put that wrench?

Neil Jones is the author of two previous *Interzone* stories, "Hands" (issue 43) and "Heads or Tails" (issue 45). He lives in Brighton, where he works as an English-language teacher. In his spare time, he advises Boxtree publishers on their "Warhammer" series of sf/fantasy books.

Time Trap. At this time of the year I am acutely aware that "Ansible Link" is written for awesome future beings possessed of superior knowledge. Should I list the novel finalists for the Nebula award (Greg Bear, *Moving Mars*; Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower*; Jonathan Lethem, *Gun, With Occasional Music*; James Morrow, *Towing Jehovah*; Rachel Pollack, *Temporary Agency*; Kim Stanley Robinson, *Green Mars*; Roger Zelazny, *A Night in the Lonesome October*) and the Philip K. Dick award (Alexander Becher, *Rim: a Novel of Virtual Reality*; Jack Cady, *Inagehi*; Ian MacDonald, *Scissors Cut Paper Wrap Stone*; Lisa Mason, *Summer of Love*; Lance Olsen, *Tonguing the Zeitgeist*; Robert Charles Wilson, *Mysterium*)? In both cases the ultimate winner will be announced before this *Interzone* appears. Decisions, decisions....

THE CEREBRATIVE PSITTACOID

Arthur C. Clarke's honorary degree from the University of Liverpool was written up by the local student newspaper far more interestingly than I could hope to do it. According to this report, the book of which Clarke said "no other ... had a greater influence on my life" was *Last and First Nun*. A title which Ken Russell must surely be holding in reserve for when he films the life of Olaf Stapledon.

David Garnett has been questing for a fresh publisher to take on *New Worlds*, and enjoyed vibrantly exciting talks with a certain outfit which was planning to launch its own sf list this year – until the controversial issue of payment arose. Payment? What mercenary talk was this? *Their* authors had day jobs and didn't need real payment ... just a trifling "honorarium" or "nominal fee". "Not paying authors – what a brilliant way of cutting costs," marvels Mr Garnett. So this is the secret of Ringpull's success. [*Stop press: Ringpull has gone bust – Ed.*]

Peter Nicholls takes us behind the scenes of Australian sf awards: "The acclaim I receive here is pretty muted, not to say inaudible, and you may have heard how tacky I found it last year that I wasn't even nominated for the Atheling Award [*for distinguished sf criticism*], let alone winning it. The winner was nominated with the grand total of two votes, it later emerged, but I think he got four in the final voting. For this sort of reason, Australian awards, Ditmars included, are pretty meaningless, not even statistically meaningful as a personal popularity vote..."

Christopher Priest had his thumb very nearly amputated by the sharp-edged shutter of a floppy disk... an event fraught with Oedipian significance since the disk contained a personal brain-child, the text of his brand-new novel *The Prestige*.

Joyce Slater died in February aged 74;



David Langford

she was known and loved by generations of British sf fans as an ever-cheery presence behind the Fantast (Medway) Ltd book-dealer's table at countless conventions. Her surviving husband Ken Slater (they married in 1948) wants everyone to know that the many letters and cards he received were greatly appreciated. Replies to letters, and Fantast mail-order despatches, may understandably be delayed for a while yet.

Terri Windling the US fantasy author, editor and artist is another of those lucky souls who (like Messrs Baxter, Greenland and Langford over here... see last issue) are subject to the sincerest form of flattery. A determined Windling impersonator who looks nothing like the real woman has been ravaging US conventions; she can apparently talk lengthily and convincingly about her role model's life and works, but – the Achilles heel – does not know how to pronounce "Devon." One imagines all these cautious conversations beginning, "So you're Terri Windling! I was just trying to remember which county Exeter is in...."

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

Secrets of Journalism. One can only admire the thoroughly researched piece on *Interzone* in a recent *Punter*, Brighton's alternative-reality equivalent of *Time Out*: "[*Interzone*]'s editor, Andrew Tidmarsh, has written to praise our recent piece on Dave Garnett and the sci-fi anthology *New Worlds*. He tells us that the latest issue of *Interzone*, which has actually been going since 1982, this month celebrates the 100th anniversary of Jules Verne's portentous novel, *The War of the Worlds*."

Tiptree Award. Co-winners were Nancy Springer for *Laque on the Wing* and Ursula Le Guin for "The Matter of Seggri" (in *Crank*) – this being the first time the "gender-bending sf" award has gone to a short story.

Trek Ripoff? Andrew Bartmess, who in the 1970s filled a gap in the *Star Trek* mythos by publishing rules for the featured Tri-D chess game, was far from grunted to learn that the US Franklin Mint – the outfit that sells those lavishly priced memorabilia, insignia, etc – had pinched his text verbatim as part of their expensive and profitable *Trek* chess package. Through a quirk of US copyright law this is apparently just about legal. AB urges a polite-ish write-in campaign to explain to the Mint that the sf world looks askance at such behaviour... certainly this column at once cancelled its order for several dozen 3D chess sets at over \$225 each.

Only in Fandom ... An *Anthropomorphic Bibliography*, compiled by Fred Patten and published by Yarf! *The Journal of Applied Anthropomorphics*, lists and annotates 250+ sf/fantasy titles featuring talking animals, "animalized humans", etc. John Clute, you need this for the *Fantasy Encyclopaedia*'s "Furry Fandom" entry! \$5 from PO Box 1299, Cupertino, CA 95015-1299, USA.

Aboriginal SF (the US magazine), belatedly realizing that there were no further heights to aspire to after its crossover edition with *Interzone* some while ago, has suspended publication and is returning submissions unread. However, editor Charles Ryan hints at rescue plans.

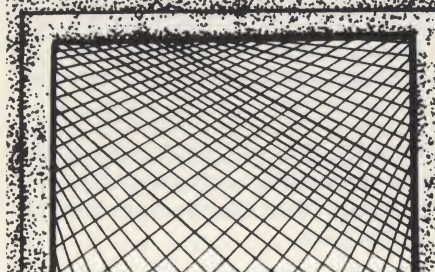
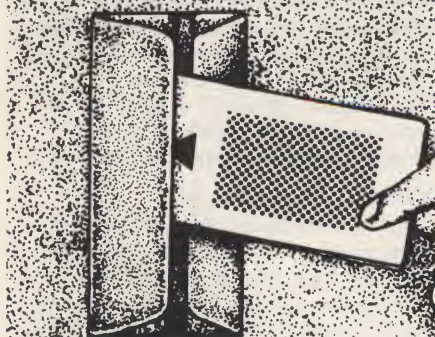
High Weirdness. All *Uri Geller's* sheaf of lawsuits against his sceptics and detractors (beginning in 1989) have now been lost, dismissed, unprofitably settled or withdrawn. Chief victim *James Randi* adds: "Mr. G. said quite positively a few years ago on a major TV show here, that he could predict, via his marvellous powers of prophecy, that he'd win the case against me. So much for prophecy and his fine control of it."

SFX is the provisional name of a magazine about sf ("mainly films and TV, but also books, comics, models, toys...") being planned by Future Publishing in Bath – best known for their computer titles.

More Great Literary Moments. "He loosened the lacings that held his braes, stepped out of them, and stood before me as naked as I. Only then did he bend to lift back my veil. I felt my eyes widen, realizing that there was more than one one reason they called Marc'h the Horse King." (Diana L. Paxson, *The White Raven*) "His mouth, for a moment, ran liquid and then it slid, almost of its own accord, down his throat." (Isaac Asimov, *Prelude to Foundation*)

BYRD
LAND
SIX

ALASTAIR
REYNOLDS



Villiers said nothing during the drive to the target area. He just sat by her in the cab, clean-shaven, nodding to the elliptic movements of Vaughan Williams' *Sinfonia Antarctica*.

"Ice is thin here," she said. "Sure you want to land a cargo plane on this stuff? Might go straight through."

He just looked at her, tight-lipped, reeking of something expensive and Orbital. Eventually his attaché case chimed and he motioned her to kill the Cat's diesel.

"Excellent, Dr Everard," he said. "They should be here any moment." Everard peered into the colourless Antarctic sky. She'd expected to see the lights of a Company plane, but the only visible thing was the crescent moon, its shadowed part aglitter with industry. She could have been there, making her name in one of the Helium 3 facilities, when instead she was here on the frozen shore of the Getz ice shelf, tending one of the Company's last Earthside concerns, patiently watching her career slide down the pan.

"They're here," Villiers said, nixing the music, nodding casually toward a dark smear half a klick away.

It enlarged – fissures racing from it, something

monolithic rising from the epicentre. Driving the Cat across kilometres of white nothing, it was easy to forget the presence of ocean not many metres below. Water was seething in black anger around the rising monolith, fractures still creeping toward the Cat.

"Relax," Villiers said. "It's one of ours." Company men emerged from the conning tower, standing in orange parkas on the rubberized foredeck. They folded bridges to the surrounding ice. Villiers zipped up and exited, cold blasting into the cab.

Everard took the dash radio. "Weber?"

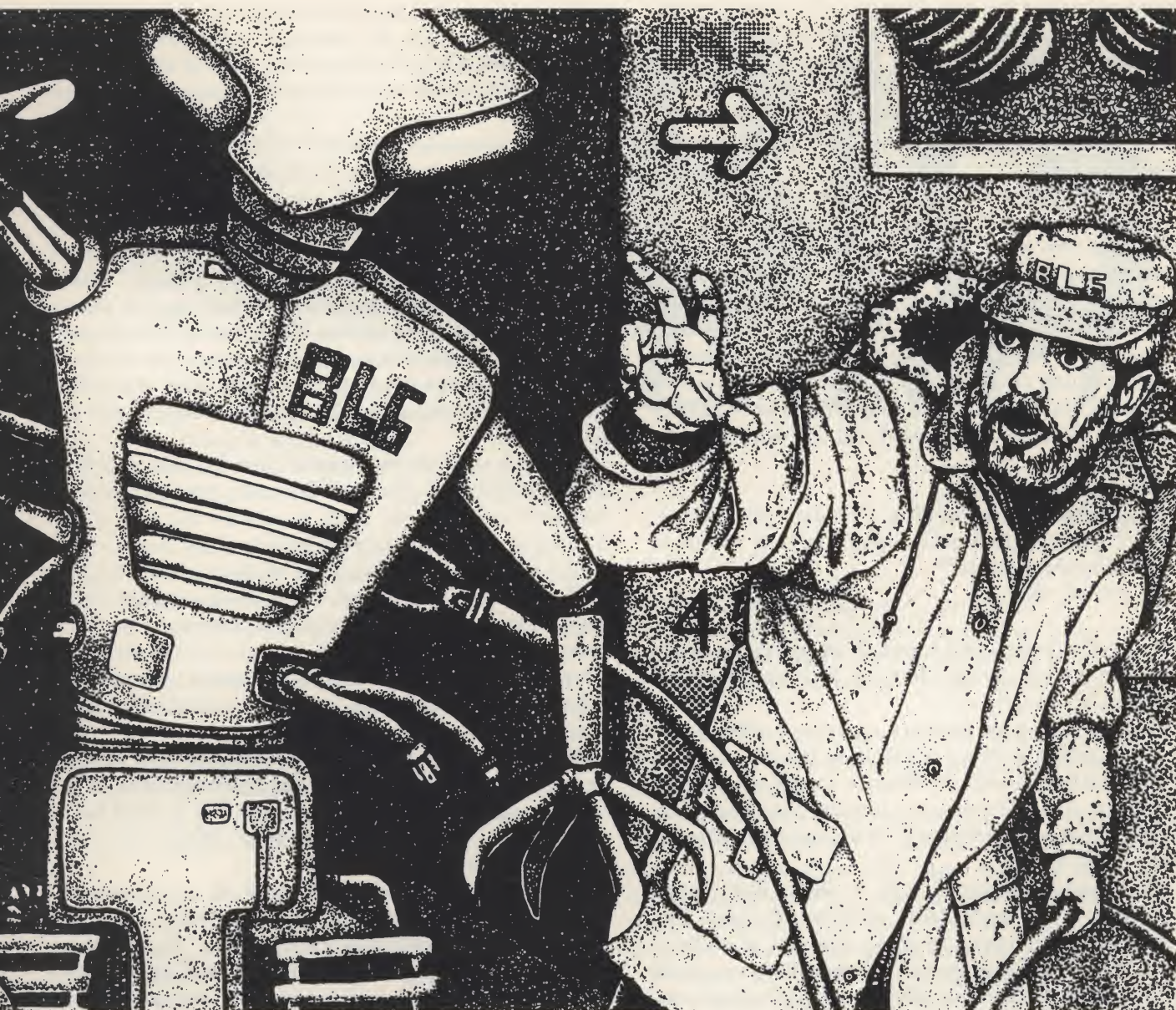
"You have my divided attention. What's going down?"

"Villiers is meeting his people." Everard heard a commentator's voice rising, followed by the static-like roar of stadium euphoria. "He tell you what this is about, by any chance? I mean, figured since you two were all alone out there..." He chomped on something.

"Well, maybe you managed to loosen his tongue."

"Stick to football, big guy." She hung up the handset.

A week ago life had been simple, albeit dull: keep Byrd Land Six running, keep her dozen people at least clinically sane, take core samples from the ice;



Illustrations by Russell Morgan

delude herself she might still be one of the Company's less expendable assets. It was, as they said, a job – and there were certainly more hellish existences imaginable. Why, she wondered, had that not been obvious then?

Villiers came first, directives placing him in command of all BL6 activities. Most of her crew were relocated, leaving only Weber, Cookie, Navarre and herself. Everard took this stoically, admittedly intrigued. Then Villiers' team arrived from Punta Arenas, unpacking crates from ski-equipped Antonovs, heavy stuff which they smuggled underground into the vehicle pool. She complained that her cardkey no longer accessed the pool, but Villiers told her this was Company business and she'd better adjust to it fast. Then he spread his palms conciliatorily and said that, hey, if she was interested, if she really wanted to get close to high-level Company activity – well, he did need someone to drive a Cat out onto the shelf tomorrow.

So here they were. Villiers hadn't said much, but she had learnt one thing. Judging by the submarine, he hadn't been exaggerating about the operation's scale.

"Open up." She let him in, noticing the bulky yellow thing that hung from one gloved hand. Like a thermos flask with an LCD panel.

"Drive," he said. The submarine slunk under the pulverized ice. She gunned the four-track south, back toward solid ground, waiting minutes before risking a question.

"What's in the coffee-pot?"

"Mars," he said, then slumped into his seat, eyes closed.

She cornered him leaving what had been her office, after the remark had gnawed at her curiosity.

"Why Mars?" she said. "We don't have anyone there, least as far as I know."

"Of course not," Villiers said, edging her outside. "People died going to Mars. Hell, people even died on Mars. The Company has no concern there."

"Why mention it?"

He barged past, but she followed him through the corridors which led to the vehicle pool. BL6 seemed larger now her people had gone. She figured two or three of Villiers' underlings remained, but they spent all their time in the pool. Villiers reached the

door and carded the slot. Through the crack Everard saw operating theatre lights, white-coat activity and too much equipment to take in immediately. Something like a boiler in the middle of the room, surrounded by consoles and apparatus. Also something like a claw-equipped tank, a kind of high-tech multi-gym by it.

"When I asked you what was in that thing..."

"The yellow box?" Villiers shrugged, blocking her view into the pool. Fresh nicks marred his chin, Everard wondering how many hours of each week, how many days of each year, he spent maintaining that profile.

"Listen, Everard," he said, sighing. "Guess you've seen too much already. Have to give you retro-active clearance; that or send you somewhere more remote than this shithole. So I guess I can tell you what was in the box."

"Magnanimous of you."

"It's half of a Franson pair." The door was closing, Villiers already through the gap. "Is that meant to mean something to me?"

He smiled. "No."

Villiers, Everard thought, wasn't as cool as he imagined. He made mistakes-like not locking her office. She clicked the light on.

Most of the desk drawers contained office junk, but the lowest held an unfamiliar plastic envelope stuffed with Company documents. Dared she remove it? So far, all she'd done was blunder into her office. Reading material elevated it to an entirely different level. So be it.

The dossier disgorged half a dozen documents, embossed with no-bullshit security flashes. She scanned them, hoping to glean the gist of Villiers' plan. The first few concerned teleoperation; crammed with technical diagrams and jargon. Big business for the Company – humans could control submersibles from the safety of ships, or mining robots from the safety of lunar bases; be made to feel physically present where it would have been dangerous or uneconomical to place a person.

Big deal, Everard thought.

The next concerned the Company's lunar activities, full of protocols and standards adhered to by the Helium 3 mining facilities. Sensitive, but almost calculatedly boring.

She was reaching for the last two documents when the light died. Her heart caught – then, almost immediately, the light returned to normality.

She phoned Weber. "Don't do that again."

"Off my back," he said. "Something just took a chunk from our energy budget. Try blaming your new pals downstairs."

"You probably think they told me what they're up to," Everard said. "But I don't know any more than you."

She had no trouble visualising Weber's *for sure* look, but could hardly blame him. "Listen," he said. "Why are you whispering? You calling from somewhere you shouldn't?"

"As if."

She hung up and stared at the last two documents blankly, waiting for the reams of squiggles to form into sensible phrases. Page after page of equations; acres of mathematics occasionally signposted by the odd, lonely word or phrase. She recognised the word Franson, remembering what Villiers had said about the thing in the box... but no mention of Mars.

Everard halted her skidoo a kilometre out, by a tripod topped with rotating cups.

Shitwork, taking her mind off Villiers. The anemometers failed regularly; iced bearings or electronics glitches. This looked like the latter, the cups clean and rotating when she fingered them. The windmills further out had been registering 30 klick winds, yet according to this unit there was barely a breeze.

Everard stowed the 'tronics box on the skidoo, then connected a spare. Admittedly the air really was still, but she ran tests to ensure the mill was healthy and pulsing its data back to BL6.

She climbed back aboard the skidoo.

The stillness, she thought, was itself unusual. For days a niner had been scurrying in from the Getz ice sheets, but now a repose had settled over the straits. Everard felt as if she was on a film set; the white infinity only a backdrop, someone having forgotten to turn on the wind machine.

She opened a window in her goggles. The CNN Personal reporter spoke from the belching scene of a tropical rail disaster, slanting the news toward her preferences. "Something else that might interest you, Dr Everard..."

She channel-hopped, stumbling on a Company commercial; slick material showing lunar workers teleoperating drones via VR hookups. The multi-gym in the vehicle pool was, she realized, the couch on which the operator lay, goggled-up and linked to the distant machine.

Then the promotion segued into something stranger; futuristic guff showing the Company on Mars. Villiers' remark aside, she knew how unlikely that was. It was too expensive to keep people on Mars, autonomous robots too stupid to work there unassisted. You couldn't teleoperate them, either, since radio signals took too long to reach Mars, the simplest task requiring tens of minutes.

But maybe the Company had other ideas. Maybe Villiers' technology was designed to make Mars exploitable, in which case his remark about the box made a warped sense. She was thinking it over when Weber cut in.

"Still miffed about the power drain?" she asked.

"More serious," he said. "Transmitter's on the fritz again."

"Terrific," she said. The stillness closed in on her, as if the unending dusk was the inside of stained bell-jar. "You know, Weber, sooner or later this run of good luck is going to peter out on us."

"Is that, you know, sarcasm?"

Everard scoped the antenna as she returned, unsurprised to see it superficially intact. The rig pulled in CNN and transmitted Weber's voice out to

the skidoo, so there could hardly have been anything majorly wrong with it. Some sub-element might have blown, or the sender dish might have slipped off-beam. Trouble was, those were exactly the things Weber would have checked.

"Too much of a coincidence," he said, meeting her in the secondary vehicle pool. Weber's beard made him as inscrutable as all the other technicians.

"What?"

"Isn't it just a little strange that they turn on something down there and a few hours later we start having problems getting a signal out? Gotta be high-end interference from their gear."

"Weber, we can't immediately assume it's Villiers' fault." Wondering as she spoke who she was really kidding. He was right, of course – realistically, there just had to be a connection. So what exactly could she do about it? Pinch her nose against Villiers' aftershave and confront him about it? Might as well stroll into the CEO's office and shit on his desk, the good it would do her career.

"Let's check it one more time."

"And then you can tell HQ it isn't our problem."

"Maybe, Weber," she said. "Maybe."

The rig was clean.

"What'd I tell you?" Weber said. "Either something downstairs is jamming it, or McMurdo aren't reading it properly." He fixed her with narrowed, snow-squint eyes. "To be honest, I can't find any interference. Pity. Leastways we could point a finger then."

"Listen," Everard said. "I'll drive out to the five-kilometre mark then take a signal reading. That way we'll know if there's a problem at our end."

"Cookie's outside," Weber said. "Send him out to five kays instead."

"Forget it," she said. "By the time I'd explained... anyway, how was he outside without my say-so?"

"We need it?"

"Since now, yes."

Weber sighed, scratching his beard. Aside from being the chef, Cookie was also a Company meteorologist. The Russian took a special interest in monitoring the windmills – it was Cookie who had told her about the unit she had fixed. "Didn't want to bother you, but after you left a whole bunch of mills began playing up. Way he said it, the mills two or three clicks out were sniffing gale force, but the closer ones were all dead."

"Dead?"

"Like there was no wind at all."

"Wait," Everard said. "I was out there and there really wasn't any wind."

She raised a hand in mock despair, though perhaps not as mock as she might have wished. "Call him up, will you? I'm going to check that signal."

The hush remained. It made working easier, but Everard didn't like it. How could gales blow a few kilometres out, nothing near BL6? More than anything it was creepy.

She passed the mill she had fixed earlier, cups idling to and fro. She kept on, settling into the



rhythmic motion of the skidoo, bouncing across snake-ridges in the ice, engine a hornet rasp goading her on. At the two-kay mark something loomed ahead; at first just a glint.

A mill, leaning oddly. She doused the motor, crunching to a halt a few meters from the mill. She stepped off, noticing the snow's glisteningly smooth texture. Sometimes, wind stippled ice and snow into unbelievable textures, magically different to anything in her experience. She doubted there was even a name for this pearly snow.

The mill was carapaced in wind-smoothed ice. It looked more like a nice-sculpture of a mill than the real thing; partially melted. No chance repairing it here – she needed to get it onto the skidoo and back to BL6. She got a good stance and tried tugging the tripod free, but it was too slippery. Then she took a chisel from the tool kit, intending to chip away the ice. But as soon as she started jagged flakes came off in her hands.

She held one of them before her eyes, knowing something was wrong. It was silvery, yet translucent – not quite ice, not quite metal.

She chiselled deeper, and the windmill crumbled away completely, collapsing in shards.

"Weber?" she called. "You read me?"

"Loud and clear. You sound... bothered."

"Weber, something strange is happening here. I've found one of the mills. It's..." She paused. What was she going to tell him? That the thing had turned into an ice replica of itself? "Well, you'd better see for yourself."

"Bring it back," Weber said. "We'll take a look at it. By the way; no luck reaching Cookie. You seen him?"

"No," she said absently, spooked by the mill. "No sign of him."

"Well," Weber said. "Stay frosty."

She signed off, collected what she could of the mill, stowing it on the skidoo's equipment rack. Rather than head immediately back she decided to loop around to where Cookie ought to have been. She hoped he had returned but had just neglected to let the others know, but wasn't optimistic.

Minutes later the headlights picked out another windmill, its cups idling. Yet another lay further, too far for the lights. She steered for the further gauge, watching the snow beneath the skis turn powdered white to glossy pearl. Then something loomed ahead, Everard swerving so hard that she almost capsized, screeching diagonally on the edge of her left ski. The engine chainsawed and spluttered. Everard jumped off and walked toward the obstacle, knowing what she would find when she arrived.

Dead, of course – but the fact of his death was only one component of her shock. What made her breath catch was what had become of him – how he had died. Cookie had become ice, literally merging with the landscape. His clothes and exposed flesh were glistening and colourless. He was sleek, lacking detail, barely recognisable.

Nauseated, she stepped back and only then saw the other windmill properly. No more than a hun-

dred meters away, spinning as if in a gale.

She hammered on the vehicle pool door until Villiers emerged, squeezing through the gap before she could better her previous glimpse.

"Whatever you're doing," she said, with an anger she didn't have to fake, "it stops now."

"Why would we do that?"

"There's a dead body outside." She paused, collected herself. "I don't know what happened to him, Villiers. But I'm sure it's connected with your project."

For all his carefully-architected bluff, she sensed he also knew something was wrong. "What is it?" she asked. "What are you doing? Just give me the basics. Tell me why we can't get a signal to the outside world, how something behind that door is affecting the weather for miles around us. Better still, tell me why Cookie's dead."

"If you don't like it," Villiers said, "why not just leave?"

He wasn't just threatening her, Everard sensed. He tried hard to make it seem so, but buried in his remark was something else. He was fishing for information – trying to get her to tell him something.

Whether or not they could leave.

"Just stop whatever you're doing," she said.

But Villiers looked frightened. "We have," he said. "But I think the damage is already done."

Navarre took a skidoo the next day. He radioed reports back from the three and four kay marks, and then there was silence. Everard began to allow herself to believe that he had made it; that passages existed out of the stillness.

She and Weber fuelled the Cat and loaded stores; enough for the two of them and Navarre, should they meet him.

"What about Villiers?" Weber asked. "Can't just leave him." She looked at him, daring him to say it again. Weber hopped aboard.

"Wait," she said, as the four-track's diesel shivered into life, perched on the ramp which exited the secondary vehicle pool. "I saw something out there." She unpacked binoculars, clambered onto the roof and swept the horizon. The air was photographically clear; the sky bruise-coloured, distance difficult to judge. It was so long since Everard had seen a street or avenue of trees she doubted her brain still had the software to handle perspective.

There. A glint – low, in the vague indeterminacy where the snow met the sky. Something neither metal, ice nor flesh but intermediate between the three, twinkling. The vague shape of a skidoo.

Something beside it.

Weber patted his jacket until he found a pack of crumpled Argentine cigarettes. He offered it to Everard, pointedly ignoring Villiers.

"Oughta give up," he said, "but right now cancer isn't high on my list of anxieties."

Villiers toyed with a snowscape paperweight, staring into its hermetic depths with a look of horrified

rapture.

"Always a risk something like this would happen," he said, his voice an uninflected drone. "Theorists warned us. They just didn't think it was likely."

"Start at the beginning," Weber said.

"You don't have clearance."

Everard thumped the table. "You dipshit. You think it makes any difference? If I was in a position to blurt your precious Company secrets we wouldn't be having this conversation."

"What about afterwards?"

"Afterwards?" Weber leaned in closer. "You mean there's a way out of this?"

"Yes. It's just..." Villiers smiled. "A little drastic." Everard snatched the paperweight, smashing it against the wall. Oil oozed from the cracked plastic.

"Talk."

"I assume you guessed the basics," Villiers said. "That it was an experiment, a demonstration for the technology which would give us access to Mars." He looked toward Weber. "We were testing a Franson link."

"Sorry," said the big man. "No bells a-ringing."

"Quantum mechanics." Villiers scratched alien stubble. "Nonlocal correlation. Action at a distance."

Everard turned to her colleague. "Translate for me, will you?"

Weber made an obvious effort to sound as laconic as possible. "Way I remember it is, when particles – photons, electrons, whatever, meet up and interact, then something odd happens. Odd enough even Einstein called it spooky."

"Spooky?"

"His expression. It's like their identities get tangled up. Afterwards, no matter how far apart they end up, they stay in touch, like they're linked by some ghostly thread." He looked ceilingwards, as if pausing to compile his thoughts into something Everard could follow. "Suppose," he said, "you take one of the particles, and do something to it – say, put it in a magnetic field so it spins in a particular way. Then it turns out that the other particle will react accordingly. Profound enough, and it's been tested to death in the laboratory – but the real worrying part is the information seems to pass between the pair instantaneously."

"You mean at the speed of light?"

"No, I mean instantaneously. Unmeasurably fast."

"So," Everard said. "Build yourself a faster-than-light communicator." Her mind raced ahead. "Pretty useful if you wanted to begin mining Mars without ever leaving Earth. Goodbye timelag, hello big bucks."

"Trouble is," Weber said. "No one ever figured a way of getting a useful signal through the effect. Matter of fact, it'd do nasty things to causality if you managed it." He lit a cigarette, filling the room with its cheap tang. "If causality was a power-drill," he said, "be like dropping it in a bath tub."

"In case you hadn't noticed," Everard said, "there have been a few odd things happening around here."

"No," Villiers said suddenly. "Causality is still intact. That's the point... the problem, in fact."

They looked at him.

"The other particle from the Franson pair is on the moon," he said. "At one of the Helium 3 facilities. We've been running teleoperated machines through the link, both ways." He glanced at Everard. "You saw the equipment – the couch and the robot. Same set-up in the lunar base. The operator at BL6 drives the robot on the moon, and the operator on the moon drives the robot you saw in the pool."

"Go on."

"We had experts working on the experiment, of course. Some of them said it would fail because of the implied violation of causality... but others said the causal problem showed the theory was too idealized."

"So you went ahead anyway."

"One of the theorists – a woman called Chu – came close to predicting what has happened," Villiers said, in the same autistic drone. "She said the link could be made, and causality preserved – at the same time." He opened Everard's desk, pulled out a notepad and pen, tore off a sheet. "Take two locations, such as BL6 and the lunar base, connected by a Franson link." His hand – which, Everard noted, was entirely steady – drew an A and B on the paper, two or three inches apart, then a dashed line between them. "Information can now flow between A and B instantaneously. As Chu pointed out, causality can only be maintained if A and B become isolated from the rest of the universe. Provided no information from either A or B can escape elsewhere, the linking creates no causal violation." He drew a dumb-bell shape which enclosed A, B and the dashed line of the link. "Now, no one took Chu's prediction very seriously. Except possibly Mother Nature." Grinned. "She's encapsulated us, you see. Locked us in. The ultimate Iron Curtain."

Everard stared at the diagram. "But we're not isolated," she said. "We're still picking up CNN, for Christ's sake."

"But that doesn't invalidate Chu. Information can reach us from outside -as long as information never gets out."

"All right." Everard said. "What about Cookie, or Navarre?"

"From what you've described, I'd say it was very simple." Villiers paused, added softly: "Degradation."

"What?"

"Degradation. Matter is information, in the end. The further they got from BL6 – the closer they got to the boundary – the less stable they became. The information which described them leaked away. They became more uniform, less distinct. They began to resemble their surroundings, mulching down to something more basic."

"You're talking about my men," Everard said. "Count yourself lucky you didn't join them. The only reason you're alive is that the boundary must be shifting, sometimes closer, sometimes further out."

"Do me a favour," Weber said. "Try not to sound so damned fascinated by it."

"But it is fascinating, isn't it? Oh, I'm sure they died quickly. Eventually you won't be able to tell them from the ice – itself degrading. I don't know what will even-

tually happen – I suppose matter near the boundary will become mono-atomic, and then even the atoms will collapse, first down to naked electrons and baryons, and then some kind of quark soup.”

“Could put a downer on your whole day,” Weber said. “Now, was I imagining it, or did dickwad here say something about a way out of this mess?”

“I said it was drastic,” Villiers said. “I wasn’t joking.”

“Your people still in there?” Weber asked, outside the pool. Villiers dug through Amex and Hertz plastic for the card. He whisked it through the slot, the access light turning green and the door opening.

“Mind telling us this solution?” Weber said. “So I can tell my grandchildren, if nothing else.”

“You’ll learn.”

What hit them, stepping inside, was neither the glare nor bustle Everard had seen before. There was no sound at all, the room dark apart from monitors and check lights. Instead, there was the overwhelming stench of Stolichnaya and death.

“Jesus,” Everard said. “What...”

“Wait.”

Weber stepped outside, folded back a bee-striped panel and threw switches.

Secondary lighting stammered on.

“When were you were here last, Villiers?”

“An hour,” he said. “Two hours... don’t know...” There were three of his people in the pool. They were obviously, violently dead, and this was nothing like the crystalline, translucent death Everard had seen outside.

Vodka bottles lay upturned or shattered on the floor, but it wasn’t the vodka which had killed them. They had been bludgeoned. Dried blood and chunks of excavated flesh splattered the room, as if one of them had gone amok with a mace.

Villiers walked toward the dead.

“Careful,” Weber said. Everard stepped inside, the security door closing. Villiers reached the first victim, killed by a head injury. He was grasping a perforated steel spar.

“Must have injured himself after killing the others,” Villiers said, examining the man’s badge. “Quince; always knew he was flaky.”

“Don’t think so,” Weber said slowly. “No blood on that stick.”

Which was when it happened.

The tank – the tracked robot Everard had seen before – burst into life, whining across the blood-slick floor toward Villiers. The machine’s clawed manipulators were scything the air; a blur of red-stained chrome.

Villiers slipped, hitting the floor with a crack, moaning even before the machine reached him. The claws moved with human dexterity, snagging his clothes and raising him to his feet. He fought the machine, trying to overbalance it, but the fall had winded him. The machine propelled him against the wall, reversed, repeated the move.

Weber shoved Everard toward the closing security door.

No,” she said, raising her voice above the machine’s servomotors. “The card.”

Weber dived back into the fray and ran behind the machine, still preoccupied with Villiers. “Who the hell’s operating this thing?” he shouted, sticking a boot into the robot’s rear end. A thick umbilical connected the machine to the central apparatus; Weber grabbed it and tugged.

“Someone on the moon, I guess,” Everard said. “Watch it!” Weber had the robot’s attention. It left Villiers slumped in the corner, spinning round, tracks screeching against the floor.

“Someone up there is seriously pissed,” Weber said, still managing to sound as if he was commenting on a dull poker game.

Everard reached Villiers while Weber kept the robot busy. It took an eternity to get the man’s jacket open and his wallet out; even longer to find the compartment where the cards lay. She began to riffle through them, trying to pick out the one which would access the pool.

“Hey,” Weber said. “Just take the damned wallet, will you?”

Everard nodded and did what he said, wondering why she had hesitated.

The door was shut when she reached it. She had assumed there would be a simple control to open it from the inside, but – consistent with the Company’s general level of paranoia about this whole project – one needed a card just to leave.

“Weber,” she called. “Get ready to run.”

She rammed the card through the slot, waiting for the red light to change to green and the door to swing open.

Nothing happened.

Wrong way. She flipped the card, and this time it worked, the door commencing its ponderous opening arc. Everard wriggled through, then told Weber to follow.

He hopped the umbilical and sprinted, no sound but his footfalls and the whine of the robot. He reached the gap a metre ahead of the machine, leaping so hard he ended up sprawled in the corridor.

The robot thumped the frame and growled, like something bestial which had missed its prey.

“Sure Villiers was dead?” he asked, back in her office.

“History,” Everard said. “Which means, I think, that we have a fairly major problem. He knew a way out of this mess.”

“I did ask him.”

“I know.” Her head was throbbing, and she suddenly realized that she hadn’t slept – or even thought of sleep – for far too many hours. “Maybe you shouldn’t have flunked that assertiveness course.”

Weber started fixing coffee. “Everard, did it strike you as odd what happened down there?”

She peered through fingers. “Weber, right now I think I need a new definition of oddness. But go ahead.”

“Why’d it attack?” He was poised with a spoonful of coffee in one hand. “Why the hostility? I mean,

assume there's a group of people up on one of the Helium 3 stations in much the same predicament as us – cut off, confused, panicky. Surely they need our help in understanding the situation, much as we need theirs." He filled the coffee maker with water and set it running. "Unless they know something we don't."

"Such as?"

He sat down. "Well, only a guess, but maybe it was self-defence."

"Don't follow."

"Think. Villiers told us there was a way out, but he said it was drastic. Well, suppose his solution helped us but not them? More to the point, what if it was positively fatal for them?"

"Maybe," Everard said, trying not to sound too convinced. "In which case, where does that leave us? Even if we figure out what Villiers had in mind, could we do it?"

"I hate to say it," Weber said. "But I think we probably could."

The coffee hissed and gurgled. Everard fell asleep before it was ready, dreaming of imprisonment within the paper weight, knocking unheard on its plastic.

Knocking woke her. Weber was gone, but the coffee was warm, and she guessed she had not fallen asleep for more than 30 minutes. It was enough: for a moment she felt ridiculously alert.

The knocking came from the pool. Weber was there already, kneeling by the door.

"What is it?" Everard asked, mouth gummy.

"The robot," he said. "Started just now, banging the door."

"Can't get through, can it?"

"No chance. Needs the umbilical connection to the Franson equipment." He was writing on a notepad.

"Weber, what's going on?"

He held up the sheet. "I assume two rapid knocks stands for a dash."

"Morse code," Everard said, astonished. "Well, what's it say?"

"No idea," Weber said. "I'm just a communications engineer, not a Boy Scout. But I know one thing. Someone wants to chat."

The knocking continued, deliberate and arrhythmic. Weber was right, of course: the content of the message mattered less than the fact that it existed. Everard knew what she had to do.

She fished out Villiers' card, wondering if the clarity she felt was just the onset of insanity.

As the door opened the robot retreated, umbilical hissing across the floor.

"Stay outside," she told Weber. "No use two of us falling for the same trap."

The robot jerked forward, then stopped a few metres away. She stepped backward, then the machine did it again, shepherding her across the pool, toward the equipment in the middle. Everard tried to ignore the corpses in the room, with limited success. She remembered how easily the machine had crushed Villiers, a petulant child smashing a rag doll against the wall.



The machine directed her to the teleoperation couch. Much of what she had to do was obvious; nestling hands and feet into sensor-padded gloves and socks, then placing a helmet over her head. After a moment of darkness colours burst before her then resolved into vision.

She was looking at a room similar to the one in which she lay, though larger and less cluttered. She wiggled her head and found her point of view changing. Oval windows overlooked a salmon-grey moon-scape, dimpled by structures and equipment.

"Over here." A woman's voice, but not one she recognised. "Over here," it called again.

"Make a walking movement."

Everard's point of view lurched forward. She figured the thing she was driving was similar to the robot which had killed Villiers. Certainly, the Fran-son link worked as advertised: no hint of time-lag or delayed response. Even after only a few seconds, Everard felt physically present in the Helium 3 facility; physically present on the moon.

"You'll get the hang of it," said the woman who stood in front of her now. She was small-seeming, arms crossed, Asian.

"Can you hear me?" Everard asked.

"Perfectly well. You, I presume, are Dr Everard."

"Who are you?"

"That doesn't matter." The woman ushered Everard across the room. "This need only be brief. I just wanted to clarify things. In any case I don't have all that much time." She nodded toward the airlock which presumably sealed off the room. "I'm the last one alive. We lost power shortly after the effects of the link began to take hold. I have a few hours of air, but even if the effects of the link could be neutralized help would come too late. I'm going to die whatever happens."

"You can't be sure."

"No, I'm afraid I can. One can be quite analytic about such matters out here. You, though..." she paused. "I know there are at least two of you. You're not in any immediate danger, are you?"

Everard thought of the diesel generators BL6 still had, of the untouched store of rations. "No," she answered. "We're okay down here."

"Good." Managing a smile. "Your chances are good. The horizon – the information barrier which surrounds us – can be broken, at least in theory."

"Whose theory?"

"Mine," she said. And Everard realized that the name on the woman's shirt was Chu; the theorist Villiers had spoken about before his death. "There is a nuclear device here, Dr Everard. A small one; for mining purposes only, of course. Detonation of the device will create a fireball. The energy should shatter the information barrier, provided we use it soon enough. The barrier is like scar tissue, you see – constantly thickening. At the moment still rather weak, perhaps weak enough to be punctured by a nuclear explosion. Once the barrier around this facility is breached, that around yours should collapse as well."

"Villiers was right," Everard said. "That is rather drastic."

"And not guaranteed to work," Chu said. "But it's

all you have." She paused. "You understand why I killed the others. They were going to detonate the device whether I liked it or not." She smiled again. "I couldn't let them do that. It had to be my sacrifice."

"But you'll die."

Again that smile. "I'm dead, Dr Everard. At least this way *you* get to survive."

Chu gave her ten minutes. Everard wriggled off the couch and left the pool, meeting Weber outside.

"What happened?"

"No time to explain," she said. "We're leaving."

"Now?"

She nodded. "We'll take the Cat."

They jogged to the secondary vehicle pool, Everard praying that the four-track would cough into life when she turned the ignition, thinking of when it hadn't, when some diesel part had to be taken out and cleaned, an hour or more of work at least. An hour or more was precisely what they didn't have.

Blue exhaust billowed out, Weber coughing as he hopped in next to her. Everard kicked in the transmission, the tracks screeching before gripping. Suddenly they moved, easing up the ramp, out into open air.

"Everard," Weber said. "Mind me asking a couple of questions?"

She steered away from BL6 – all that mattered – and turned to Weber. "I met Chu," she said, out of breath. "Up at the Helium 3 facility."

"And?"

"She's going to get us out of this."

And told him the rest; how Chu was the only person left alive up there, how she would detonate the nuclear device in the hope of cracking the information barrier around the Helium 3 facility. "She says once the barrier at that end is down, there'll be no causal requirement for ours. It should just collapse." She looked at her watch. "About two minutes, if she keeps her word."

"Sounds like she meant it," Weber said. "There's just one thing I don't understand."

Everard kept the hammer down. Even at the speed they were making, there was no danger of reaching more than a couple of kilometres from BL6 before Chu detonated the device; no danger of reaching the point where Cookie or Navarre had died. But that one or two kilometres of distance might make all the difference.

"Go on."

"Why such a hurry to leave?"

"Chu said there could be leakage," Everard said. "From the explosion. Some of it could leak through the link." Checked her watch again. About one minute; maybe less. "Normally only information gets through. But Chu said the equations allowed solutions where energy could leak through as well. She wasn't sure whether they were applicable, but..." Another glance at the watch. Less than a minute, surely. "She said we shouldn't take any chances. Best to get as far away from BL6 as possible."

Weber maintained a stunned silence.

Everard glanced in the rear-view mirror. The base was about a kilometre behind now. Any distance

made in the next few seconds surely would make no difference.

She killed the engine."Weber, pass me the binoculars."

Everard hopped onto the ice. She propped elbows on the hot cowl and pointed the binoculars at the crescent moon. Chu had said that her base was in shadow, which meant it had to be in the unlit, gibbous region.

Right now, Everard thought, anyone approaching BL6 from beyond the barrier would see a zone of hemispherical blackness; a region from which no information could flow. Same went for the Helium 3 facility... except any moment now, Chu was going to shatter the barrier, and nuclear light would erupt through.

She ought to be able to see that; if only as a transient pin prick against the darkness. Any second now. "Everard!"

Weber was pointing back toward BL6, with the strangest expression Everard had ever seen. She followed his gaze.

Light was streaming from the base; a pinkish, eye-hurting, twisting column of fire, nebulized by flickering branches of lightning. It whiplashed back and forth, evil and tentacular. Everard thought of that fire, instantly consuming Chu, instantly consuming everything.

Leakage. Before the glare blinded her, she looked to the moon, and saw – though she was never certain it was real – a glint of colourless light, in the moon's shadowed portion.

The column of fire streaming from BL6 ended, abruptly, leaving a ringing silence. Everard hadn't noticed the noise while it was there. But now it was over she realized it had been the loudest sound she had ever heard. She almost could not hear Weber shouting to her.

"What?" she mouthed, the ringing in her ears drowning out her own voice.

"Look!"

Weber was pointing away from the smoking wreckage of the base toward the Getz straits. She squinted and made out the tiny, distant shape of a windmill. Spinning crazily. Everard waited for the wind's cold slap against her skin. It came softly, building in stages until she knew it had to be at least a sixer. The sting had never felt so good.

"C'mon," she said to Weber. "Russkaya station's a good 50 clicks from here. We've got a long drive ahead of us."

Plenty of time, she thought, to consider a career move.

Alastair Reynolds's earlier stories for *Interzone* include "Nunivak Snowflakes" (issue 36), "Dilation Sleep" (issue 39) and "Enola" (issue 54). A globe-trotting scientist, who has probably visited all the exotic places he writes about (from North to South Pole), he currently lives in the Netherlands.

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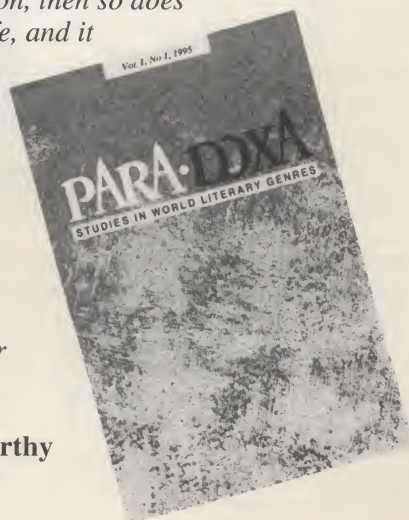
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The True and the Real

Paul J. McAuley

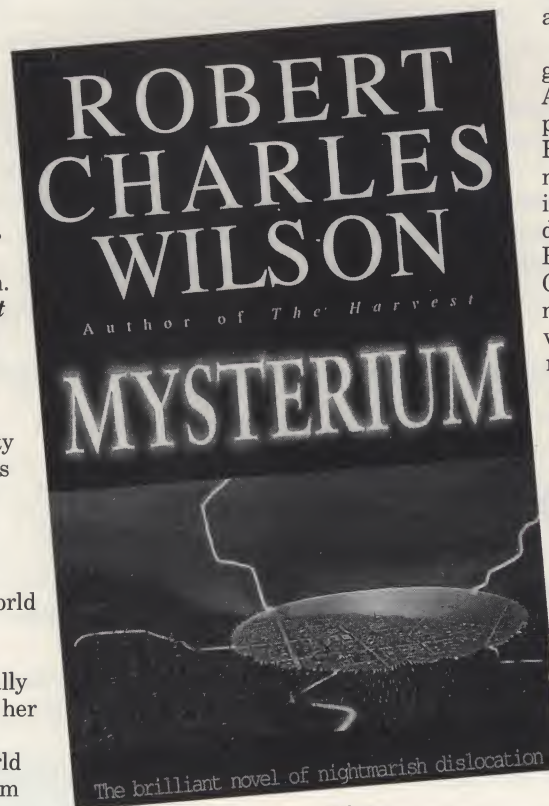
One of the central themes of sf is that of discovering that there is something more to the world than its quiddity. In the real world, that something else is, of course, quantum mechanics, but most people, as Richard Feynman famously and despairingly commented, don't understand quantum mechanics. Nor do most SF writers – or if they do, they don't burden their readers, or their narratives, with its complex paradoxes (a recent honourable exception is Greg Egan's *Quarantine*). Rather than grappling with the ontological reductionism which claims that basic reality is no more than the forces and particles studied by physics, such revelations that these fictions grant tend to work from the top down. They are Shaggy God stories, revealing that everything is run either by a wizard, or by a showman who runs the wizard from behind behind a curtain.

Elisabeth Vonarburg's *Reluctant Voyagers* (Bantam, \$5.99, in a crisp translation from the original French by Jane Brierly) is a variation of the Shaggy God story that deploys considerable intelligence and subtlety in its tale of the stranger who reveals the power behind the curtain. It is a long, complex novel which takes its time in gathering direction, yet nevertheless grips once it finally embarks on its quest to riddle the world beyond the known world.

Catherine, a middle-aged French-Canadian lecturer in Quebec, gradually realizes that the perceived history of her world is very different from her own memories (which in turn are of a world whose history significantly varies from that of ours): the Second World War stretched into the 1950's; Canada borders a weaker American Union rather than the United States; visions of other places are regarded as being as commonplace as dreams. Catherine's own visions are judged to be something new and therefore dangerous; she attracts the attention of the authorities and of agents from the mysterious North, where a faction of Francophones are thought by the South to be fomenting revolution. Aided by the grandchildren of the visionary founder of the North, and accompanied by a mysterious little girl, Catherine, like the heroine of Vonarburg's first novel, *The Silent City*, voyages into the wild to redeem the world, here by reconciling its apparent reality with her own memories.

The arc of the plot does not describe a voyage outwards, but one inwards; a repeated motif is that of gardens, the most important of which is that of a memory inside Catherine's own head.

This quest, much of it internalized, moves at a leisurely pace. While Vonarburg perfectly conveys Catherine's increasingly dizzy distrust of apparent reality, her search is prolonged by the fact that no one will give Catherine a straight answer to her questions, even in the talkative resolution.



While a perfectly legitimate motif in a novel where nothing can be taken for granted, nevertheless this evasiveness does become a little tiresome. Nor is the detail which Vonarburg lavishes on her world without its longueurs – especially in the glacially slow opening scenes, which appear to be setting up a novel of social conflict in an alternative Quebec where the French-speaking Canadians have been shut away in a ghetto. Yet the patient reader will find that Vonarburg neatly ties up all the loose ends she scatters throughout the text in an ending that, given the impeccably conveyed unease of the narrative, is surprisingly and satisfyingly optimistic, like a door at the end of a narrowing passage suddenly and unexpectedly

opening onto a grand landscape.

Robert Charles Wilson is a Canadian writer by adoption (born in the USA, he has been living in Canada for more than thirty years) whose new novel, *Mysterium* (New English Library, £4.99) also involves alternate realities, something of a theme in Wilson's oeuvre. In *Mysterium*, the stock genre notion of a small town displaced whole to another reality is transformed and enlivened by Wilson's careful plotting and refusal to simplify moral dilemmas.

An accident in the nearby government research plant transfers the American town of Two Rivers to a parallel, less scientifically advanced Earth. The USA does not exist; the northern part of the American continent is divided between the Spanish-dominated south and a northern Francophone theocracy, the Consolidated Republic, built on a mixture of gnostic beliefs and Puritan values. The Consolidated Republic regards Two Rivers as an embarrassment to be eliminated as soon as possible once it has been sieved of useful knowledge – crucially, of the technology required to construct atomic weapons. Against a background of an increasingly intolerant military rule – culminating in the execution of schoolchildren who protest a ban on Christmas trees – the inhabitants of Two Rivers must try to save themselves before their town is used as a test site for the Consolidated Republic's first atomic bomb. In a novel constructed of nicely understated, symmetrical ironies, the opposing tensions in the plot precisely mirror each other: the town will be destroyed by the theocracy's application of its own science; it can save itself only by using the theocracy's gnosticism to riddle the scientific accident which displaced it.

Wilson convincingly portrays the members of the occupation force as nothing more or less than human, and his theme of the conflict between duty and the human heart – the theocracy refuses to see inhabitants of the town as human, while individuals within the occupying forces make their own alliances – raises difficult moral ambiguities for which he refuses to provide easy answers. The ending has something about it, quite literally, of *deus ex machina*, but its evocation of the saving grace of the frontier urge, of the

flight beyond the next range of hills away from authority, is as genuinely and rousing American as *Huckleberry Finn*.

Richard Calder's *Dead Boys*

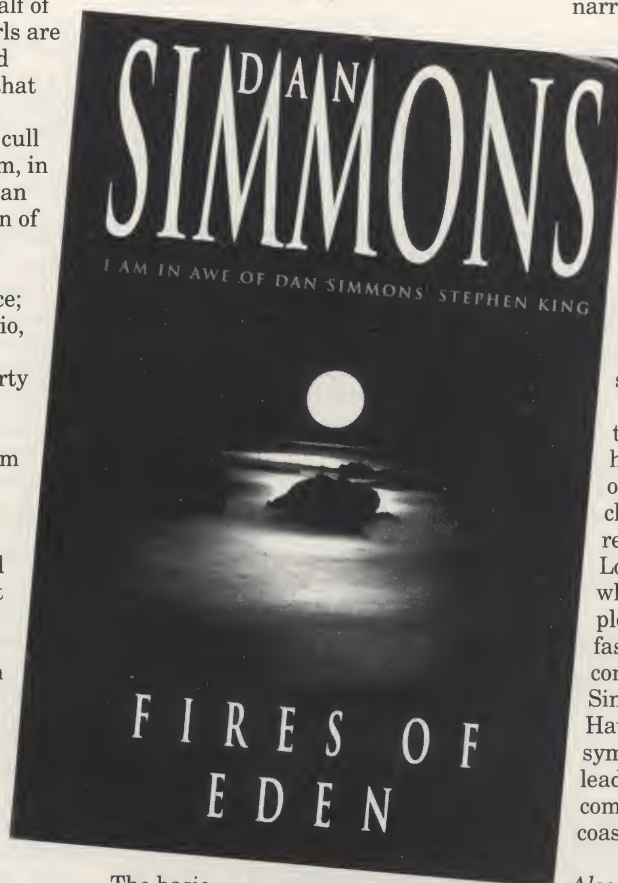
(HarperCollins, £4.99) is the sequel, natch (although its author's preferred title was *Strange Genitalia*), to *Dead Girls*, arguably one of the best, and certainly one of the richest and strangest, SF novels of the first half of the 90s. The eponymous Dead Girls are the Lilim, human females infected with a nanotechnological plague that transforms them, at puberty, into concupiscent gynoid dolls. Only a cull planned by the leaders of the Lilim, in alliance with an enfeebled USA, can prevent the burgeoning population of Lilim from destroying the human race and, with it, themselves. For Lilim require humans to reproduce; they infect human males by fellatio, and infected males can only engender daughters, who at puberty will be transformed by nano into dolls.

Dead Boys takes off directly from the ending of *Dead Girls*. Young doll junkie Ignatz Zwakh, mourning the death of his Lilim lover Primevera, who has infected him with the plague, is hiding out with Primevera's preserved sex organs and quantum mechanical Central Processing Unit. Through the CPU, Ignatz's future daughter, hiding out on Mars from Dagon, an implacable assassin, whispers instructions that will ensure her birth and subvert the past by inextricably weaving the Lilim into human history.

As in *Dead Girls*, Calder brilliantly evokes a Third World seething with strange out-of-control technologies and polymorphous perversions, and sustains intense metaphorical riffs on the conjunction of sex and death, although these sometimes verge on the violent misanthropy of phallocentric hard core pornography. The gynoids crave not sex but sex-death, striking ritual poses as they are shot through breasts and belly, or knifed in the vagina, or ravaged by a fatal kind of cunnilingus by their male counterparts. They are victims of their hyper-femininity, which in turn implies that all women are victims, as indeed are all the women of the novel, who are all Dead Girls. There is, as someone or other once said, no alternative.

The novel rides not so much on its self-engulfing plot, but on the struggle of Ignatz/Dagon to win redemption in the slide through multiplying and deepening parallel universes. The increasingly complex landscapes of *Dead Boys* never quite collapse into autistic incoherence, but at times Calder's allusive imagery appears to be so intensely private that the reader is almost excluded as the pell-mell

invocation of archetypes hurtles towards the lyrical ending, in which the novel swallows its own beginning whole. It isn't an easy novel, and shows no mercy in either its frank depictions of shockingly cruel sex or its impacted self-swallowing plot, but there's no denying its disturbing originality, which explodes in your face like a fistful of fireworks.



The basic story of Dan Simmons's latest horror novel, *Fires of Eden* (Headline, £16.99), of developers paving over sacred ground only to reap the whirlwind, was not new when *Poltergeist* used it. Here, a billionaire has built an exclusive luxury resort on a sacred site in a remote part of one of the Hawaiian islands, freeing gods who were entombed after being defeated in a conflict with the chief female deity, and who now set about collecting souls with a maximum of carnage.

Simmons, who has forged his career by refurbishing genre clichés, infusing them with an erudite literary sensibility and deploying them with evident relish, redeems this stock plot with a parallel tale of how the gods were defeated a hundred years before, with the help of Mark Twain and Lorena Stewart. The historical tale, couched in the form of Lorena Stewart's journal, perfectly captures both the spirited voice of a Victorian adventures, and the asperity of the young Mark Twain, here still Samuel Clemens, an obscure journalist out of San Francisco.

The contemporary part of the novel, in which the historical narrative is

repeated as farce, is less convincing. Eleanor Perry, a distant relative of Lorena Stewart who is on a pilgrimage to the site of her ancestor's adventures must use the rituals outlined in Lorena's journal to appease and defeat the gods, and as the two narratives converge to identical climaxes, the first undermines the tension of the second. And while Simmons enlivens his narrative with nicely judged comedy, as the billionaire (overtly modelled on Donald Trump) tries to unload the doomed resort on an unsuspecting Japanese businessman while simultaneously trying to keep ahead of the three women in his life, the farce undermines the menace of the gods. At the end, the persona of their leader broadens into a swaggering mixture of John Belushi and Rodney Dangerfield, rather undermining Simmons's scrupulously researched mythos.

Nevertheless, this is an efficiently told tale, less bloody than it might have been (most deaths are offscreen, and of minor walk-on characters) and compelling in its rendering of the adventures of Lorena Stewart and Mark Twain, which, with the concision of a well-plotted novella, moves considerably faster than the overstretched contemporary plot it interpenetrates. Simmons's evocations of Hawaii and Hawaiian culture are deft and sympathetic, but his meteoric rise leads one to expect more than mere competence, and he seems to be coasting here.

Also noted:

Making Love (Raven, £4.99) is a collaboration between Nancy Holder and Melanie Tem that infuses an homage to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* with the sensibilities of the romantic novel. Here, the monster is a perfect lover, Phanes, created from the desires of Charlotte, a prim unmarried schoolteacher, in a ritual invented by her crazy brother. There's a nicely observed conflict between Charlotte's intellectual and moral unease and her surrender to her hitherto repressed desires, and while its trajectory is predictable and the homage is sometimes too literally diagrammatic, the novel gains force as Phanes and the host of children created by Charlotte's brother take on a life of their own and angrily flail against their limits. It's a satisfying darkening of the unfocused pastels of romantic wish-fulfilment.

Paul J. McAuley

John Clute is labouring on two large books at present (one of them the long-promised *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*), but he will be rejoining us as lead reviewer soon.

Branching Out

Chris Gilmore

I think books for children must have come on (or branched out) since my time. Certainly, I was never given anything remotely like *MapHead* by Lesley Howarth (Walker Books, £8.99). It concerns the well-overdue moral development of the 12-year-old offspring of a mortal woman and a being from the (undefined) Subtle World, who combines the particular power to project maps onto his forehead and cranium with the outlook and attributes of a latterday Saunk Hogben. "MapHead" is his true name incidentally, not a nickname, and he isn't entirely comfortable with any other.

He and his father (who calls himself Powers, but may have another name) are spending the summer in a commercial tomato greenhouse, invisible to the plant-tenders whose brains they have manipulated. The book opens with the preparation of a meal there. It's a simple meal of one course only: Catshake is prepared by liquidizing a cat from the inside (this takes about ten seconds). After draining and disposal it yields about two pints of (by Powers's calculation) "about fifty-eight per cent usable protein. Quite a bit of rubbish in a cat."

Rather surprisingly, in view of the above, his father feels that it's time for MapHead to become socialized by spending a few weeks at school before he comes into his full powers, an experience for which he receives very little preparation. Powers buys him some school shoes and starts a crop of hair on his head, but leaves him to sink or swim, being far more interested in his own agenda — to re-establish, if only fleetingly, contact with Kay, MapHead's mother, whose memories of their liaison he has wiped. Why he wants to do this (like much else) is never made clear; the story is told very much from MapHead's viewpoint, as he discovers the bittersweet pleasures of friendship (for his half-brother, Kenny), forgiveness (for an irascible traffic warden), admiration (for his teacher), compassion (for the school hamster, and, in retrospect, the liquidized cat) and love (for his mother).

All these relationships must of necessity be transient; MapHead's destiny is to travel throughout all space and time, most often alone, and those with whom he experiences the most intense emotions are those whose memories it will be his most urgent duty to expunge. The book is

most seriously concerned with the recognition of that duty; that a being with the attributes of a superhero, the lifestyle of a cheesemite and the morals of a pitcher plant should roam unchecked through four dimensions is a notion inherently repugnant to the traditional values to which Lesley Howarth implicitly subscribes. Rightly? Who can say — and to what extent children will appreciate the subtext I'm far from sure, but although the book is a trifle twee in places (mainly over the transformation of the traffic warden into a 1960s love-freak), Howarth doesn't write down to her audience. Try it on bright children up to about eleven. Not all will like it, but those who do will have no cause to shudder in later life.

Also from Walker come two books by Hugh Scott — *The Place Between* (£4.99, B-format original) and *A Ghost Waiting* (£2.99, A-format reprint). They are very much variants on a theme, as both are written from a childish outlook, both assert traditional middle-class values and both tell much the same story. *The Place Between* is rather the more satisfactory of the two; being written in first person and therefore from a single, female viewpoint it presents a less cluttered effect.

Stella Lane, daughter of a widowed west-country antique dealer, becomes aware that a local wood of vaguely sinister reputation is beginning to overflow its boundaries. Trees are seen, clearly but temporarily, by daylight and in darkness, in places where they are not supposed to grow. People disappear; other people appear in places and in circumstances where they would seem to have no business, but vanish before they can be challenged.

Stella tries to find out what is going on and eventually finds herself precipitated into the "place" of the title, which strongly resembles the past as visited in Simak's *Time is the Simplest Thing*. Thereafter the ending is a bit rushed, when a tall, dark, handsome, two-dimensional man comes along to sort everything out. *Podkayne of Mars* it ain't, but the portrait of a young girl approaching womanhood is achieved without mawkishness, even when Scott has her realize that her friendship with the boy next door is about to develop into a sexual relationship. She neither draws back, goes broody, succumbs to feminist self-pity nor blows her brains through her gonads.

A cynic might say, "so much for Hugh Scott's realism," which is a hard standpoint to challenge, especially in a fantastic context. Copping out, I observe that *The Place Between* is very obviously targeted at girls aged 11 to 14, for whom (from my middle-aged male perspective) I think it should work.

A Ghost Waiting is less successful, giving the impression that it intends to address more serious issues but skimping their development. Once again the setting is rural England, but it's told in third person from the viewpoints of Rosie and Andrew, children of a vicar — but most definitely the sort to have no truck with priestesses, gay weddings or socialism.

There had been an elder brother (James), recently deceased from (apparently) natural causes, and his is one of the ghosts that is beginning to impinge on the living. Like the apparitions in *The Place Between*, they appear by daylight and darkness, and are not always visible to the same people at the same time. Rosie (and Andrew, who had serious reservations about James when he lived, and is unwilling to relinquish them now he's dead) is well on the way to being interestingly scared when the whole business is brought to an abrupt end by another middle-aged, male *deus ex machina*. Even so, it contrives to end on an ambiguous note, and my principal regret is that Scott chose to write it as a book for children. As a full-length book for adults about children it might well have worked better. Even so, I recommend it for both sexes in the same age-group for some highly atmospheric passages, an excellent sense of place and its uncompromising subtext (rare in modern children's fiction) that moral action has other and higher concerns than deference to the feelings of others.

The conceit that gods depend for their powers and continued existence on a continuing supply of worshippers goes back at least as far as Lord Dunsany; it's the subject of Robert Graves's poem "Outlaws" and the Weyland episode in *Puck of Pook's Hill*, and has become quite a cliché of fantasy — to the extent that there's a standard mode of decline: an abandoned god is supposed to fade gently away like Dora Copperfield. Tom Holt, in *Odds and Gods* (Orbit, £14.99) has chosen to adopt the conceit, but apply a very different

mode. His obsolete gods are accommodated harum-scarum, without regard for pantheon, mythos or seniority, in the Sunnyvoyde Residential Home for retired deities, where most of them retain substantial vestiges of their traditional powers and attributes plus sundry physical and spiritual afflictions which will be familiar to viewers of *Waiting for God* and *One Foot in the Grave*. Neither quality cuts any ice with Mrs Henderson, who runs the place with the petty and tyrannical routine of a 1930s seaside landlady, for like all soap operas, *Odds and Gods* depends heavily on repeated jokes for its effects. Not all are equally good, but at least there's plenty of them.

The book can therefore be said to achieve its effects by rubbing two clichés against each other – but (to strain the metaphor) the outcome is a cheerful little blaze. As the gods tend to figure in mutually exclusive creation myths, Holt has gone out of his way not to impose any sort of internal consistency on their relationships with our own world or each other. The result is rather as if the logic of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* had applied to Earth from an early stage, yet had momentarily produced something not wholly unlike what we see around us. Thus Sunnyvoyde commands views of the Elysian Fields and three galaxies, but Sandra, a nurse employed there, commutes by bus from Wolverhampton – a notion which we moderns may find hard to swallow, but would have given Aristophanes no trouble at all. Mount Olympus (9,700 feet) is not an unconscionable climb, yet to the Greeks of classical times it was an article of faith that Heaven was to be found there; Holt, who was a classicist long before he was a novelist, has adapted the classical belly-laugh for a modern audience, and done it very well. This is not a new idea either – *Orpheus in the Underworld* works exactly the same way – but Holt's treatment is often ingenious: Pandora's box appears in the guise of a mail-order catalogue, and Pan's ability to induce panic makes him a natural to do voice-overs on commercial TV.

In the circumstances the story can hardly be expected to make much sense, nor does it. For the record, it hinges on the dastardly attempts of Julian, Osiris's "godson" (i.e., remote descendant through the human line), to gain control of Osiris's wealth, powers and ultimately the whole world. Julian being a lawyer (i.e., avaricious and unprincipled) is typecast for the heavy, but the outcome is never in doubt; the only question is how much enjoyable slapstick, larded with how many

incongruities, and encrusted with how much ornamentation, Holt can cram in before bringing in the conclusion. This sort of thing has no chance whatever played straight, but even played for laughs it wilts after a while; as the original recedes from view the parody loses relevance, so ever more outrageous structures must be reared on ever more flimsy foundations to sustain ever more fugitive interest. Consequently the ending loses all organic connection to the beginning, but there's plenty of good, clean, if slightly excessive fun on the way.

A game which undergraduates used to (and perhaps still) play goes like this. You equip yourself with a *Roget's Thesaurus* and select a passage of prose or blank verse (one with plenty of concrete imagery is best) from a fairly obscure source (*Timon of Athens*, say, or *Paradise Lost* Bk V). You then assign to each word (except the operators, pronouns and auxiliary verbs), a randomly generated three-figure number. As you reach each word you delete it, and substitute an equivalent part of speech in the category denoted by that number in *Roget*. For example, applying pi to the line "O what a rogue and peasant slave am I" produces "O what a throb and mighty calm am I" (in my edition; other editions, other results, and I could have chosen other words from the same categories). You give the result a suitably oblique title, and submit it to an *avant-garde* magazine.

I suspect that everyone who plays games of this kind secretly hopes that they will supply him with an occasional striking phrase which he can introduce into his own writing, but there is truly no substitute for talent, and most drop it sooner or later. Reading *The Myth of the World: Surrealism 2* (ed. Michael Richardson; Dedalus, £8.99) I was reminded of a potentially more harmful application of the game – the belief that the gibberish produced actually portends something, that it has inherent significance and is decipherable. Curiously, David Langford's little allegory in *Interzone* 92, which I read the day before starting on this book, touches on a similar theme – and there's no significance in that, either.

The trouble with the 47 short pieces by 46 writers here assembled (and to my unspecialized eye most of the writing seems more absurdist or dada than surrealist) is that they almost all convey the same sense of randomness applied to an extremely simple formal structure in a vain attempt to sustain indefensible pretensions. No doubt the process of translation has been more than

usually fraught; in the absence of any indisputable meaning the only honest approach is to stick rigidly to the letter of the text, which constricts translator and editor alike while ensuring that whatever verbal felicity the original may have remains well and truly buried.

At times something of interest seems about to emerge, as here when a young lady called Pamela is introduced:

Her father, who ran a filthy junk shop and gave her a mandolin as a gift, taught her how to ride a bike without tyres, to appraise forged paintings, broken jewellery, and XVIIIth century armchairs with no seats.

A promising character, until you read on:

She escaped from the carriages through gaps in their floors. Her lilac pulse was never captive and brushing against the doctor's crew-cut gave her a dread of the warm hair of bats squatting on her stomach.

Later we are told:

It seemed to Pamela that she had just drunk from one of those bronze chalices placed like a gong on the granite where the rain dissolves infusoria in licorice water to ward off the evaporating sun and where children are sent for refills at verdigrised taps next to a mass of dried wreaths, scalps and rotten flowers.

This is from one of the most coherent and structurally sophisticated pieces, and the evocation of a family Sunday afternoon in the cemetery might have been magnificent in the context of a well wrought character-driven novel. As it is, it relates to nothing – one might as well seek wisdom in a play by Beckett or Ionesco. The author (Georges Limbour) surely had talent, but as he chose to write bilge it was wasted. Bilge remains bilge, whether derived from automatic writing (practised by many surrealists), random-number programmes, dreams (plain or drug-enhanced) and (most crucially) *regardless of whether the writer was capable of better*.

Many of them were surely not. To translate the legend of Sawney Bean is well enough, but for Louis Scutenaire to tack a couple of well known names to it and call the result an original work is pure and simple fraud; Paul Nougé's contribution is worse – a dreary slice of porn from a top-shelf glossy, the work of someone with nothing better to do.

In consequence, the rare stories written more or less straight and with any hint of talent, such as Nelly Kaplan's "Solidary (*sic*) Pleasure" (a simple tale of necrophiliac love) and

Marcel Marien's "The Ghost of a Shadow" (a tall story with a pretty twist) seemed all the better by contrast – which cannot have been the other writers' intention. The only conclusion would seem to be that surrealism is best confined to the graphic arts: three of the most

accessible "modern" artists of this century are Magritte, Dali and Escher, but much of this book is inaccessible for the good reason that it does not repay the effort – too much straining after effect rapidly yields no effect at all, so that I very often found I had forgotten the contents of one

paragraph before I had finished the next. I could go on a long time about this, but Anthony Burgess did it a lot better than I can in his novel *MF*. If you want to know how absurdist writing actually works, buy that instead.

Chris Gilmore

With the exception of the eponymous rodent-villains of *The Rats*, no major protagonist of a James Herbert novel has ever returned to feature, even in cameo, in a subsequent title. Until now. *The Ghosts of Sleath* (HarperCollins, £14.99) is a sort-of-sequel to *Haunted* and sees the return of David Ash, the psychic investigator whose scepticism regarding all things supernatural was so rudely overturned in that taut and surprisingly effective little novel. Now, fully equipped with a drink problem, a Dark Secret In His Past and a major grudge against the inhabitants of the Other Side, Ash is called in to investigate ghostly goings-on in Sleath, a tiny, picturesque hamlet nestled away in a valley in the Chilterns (or so the guidebooks might have it, were Sleath not miles off the beaten tourist track and, more to the point, were it not a made-up place). The spirit of a drowned child has returned to haunt its mother, but, as Ash discovers, this is merely the tip of an iceberg of spectral spectacles which have begun to plague the village and which appear to be leading up to some sort of apocalyptic climax.

But of course. Herbert loves apocalyptic climaxes. Few of his novels end without some mansion burning down to the ground in a vast cleansing conflagration, the latter pages obscured in a hail of collapsing masonry and billowing smoke and licking flames. It is almost as if he is scared to end without an End, as if the earth has to be scorched flat and the land salted before he can bear to take his leave of a novel and move on to pastures new. He is, it seems, a man who prefers to burn his (fictional) bridges behind him.

The Ghosts of Sleath does not suffer for being a sequel, and all references to the events in *Haunted* are briefly but satisfactorily glossed. In fact, this is one of Herbert's better books, and there are passages, notably when he is describing the tranquil countryside around Sleath, when his writing transcends its usual prosaic functionality to approach something like quality. Although the characters are pretty much as you'd expect – two-dimensional with a perceptible hint of depth – and there are several grammatical howlers (notably the gross misuse of the words "emotive" and "disinterested") which a bold

A Masterpiece of Packaging James Lovegrove

editor might have dared to correct, in general one gets the impression that Herbert has raised his game for this one, and it's an enjoyable, if undemanding, revenant romp.

Mention must be made about the production of the book, which is outstanding and with which, I believe, the author himself was closely involved. The jacket is a masterpiece of packaging, emulating the parched leather and cracked gold-leaf embossing of an antique grimoire or religious tome, and the frontispiece illustration of the village is skilfully executed; the text is typo-free, and each chapter begins with an elegantly illuminated first character. This is how a hardback book should look: if a punter is going to hand over 15 or so pounds for a copy, it should be a desirable object that looks and feels worth owning.

There's not a lot to say about the plot of Stephen Laws's *Macabre* (Hodder and Stoughton, £15.99). Homeless people are disappearing, only to reappear somehow changed, somehow ... not living. At the same time, a man called Ramsden, who is dead, wants to come back to life and exact his revenge on the members of the cult he created, the Sabbarite, who betrayed and killed him. And the only people standing against him are Tony, a traumatized Falklands veteran; Randall and Ranjana, two teenage runaways; Lauren, a former member of the Sabbarite; Lauren's psychic baby Sparrow; and enigmatic vagrant Mac, whose true identity and connection with Tony, supposedly a mystery, are patently obvious from the word go. These six Laws shunts unceremoniously from one venue to the next, at first individually and then, as they meet up with one

another, together. Along the way they encounter some teenage thugs, a demon assassin called (somewhat thuddingly) a Mechanic, who can be diverted from his mission by the most banal of methods, and an eyeless girl who is wise beyond her years. Happily, the omniscient Sparrow is on hand most of the time to explain what is going on, so the reader doesn't get lost, and at last everybody finds themselves in the right place at the right time for the book's climax, which takes place in the crypt of an abandoned church with the floor knee-deep in corpses, the bad guys knocking on the door, and the ground yawning open to reveal Hell.

Laws is yet another Man Who Would Be King, but, worse than that, in striving for "relevance" in *Macabre* (the title has no direct connection with the story), he manages to paint a wholly unconvincing portrait of contemporary British urban life as a relentless round of poverty, violence, insensitivity and misery. This is not to say that certain social problems do not exist – that no one is homeless, that children are not abused, that people do not go missing, that war veterans are not shabbily treated by the government that sent them off to fight – or that such problems are not worth writing about. It is just that Laws exploits these tragic situations so remorselessly for the purposes of entertainment that they lose their meaning, becoming little more than convenient hooks on which to hang the story, and had he done his job properly with this novel, the "Author's Postscript" at the end, in which he rubs our noses in the book's political content, would surely be redundant.

Usually when an established mainstream novelist decides to try his or her hand at science fiction, the results are disastrous (see Paul Theroux's *O-Zone* for details). With *Twenty Twenty* (Sceptre, £15.99) Nigel Watts successfully bucks the trend. Here is an intelligent, well-written piece of fiction which is set in the future and features among other technological devices a state-of-the-art Virtual Reality project, and which manages to combine the novel of ideas with the novel of action to the detriment of neither.

For *Twenty Twenty* Watts employs the dual-narrative form so beloved of contemporary literary authors,

alternating chapters between two stories which, although initially appearing to have no connection, ultimately prove to be closely linked. In the first storyline, a writer infected with a killer virus flees to northern Canada to live out his last days in icy isolation in an almost abandoned town with only an old Eskimo storekeeper and his own imagination for company. In the other storyline, a charming but vapid American cybnaut called William Morrison and a repressed British scientist called Julia O'Brien escape the advanced VR project they are working on in order to search for the answer to a common mystery: each has found a novel in which his or her

life is described in detail, and they want to get in touch with the author of the books and find out how he knows so much about them.

The way Watts gradually brings the two storylines together, while it requires a deep-breath suspension of disbelief, is nonetheless intriguing, and his take on the traditional future-world-in-entropy scenario is refreshingly aloof and unsensational – reminiscent in its coolness of another more famous dystopic novel with a year for a title, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (a link reinforced by the name Julia O'Brien, a conflation of the names of two prominent characters in Orwell's book). What *Twenty Twenty* is really about,

though, is a retreat from the reality of the world, whether it be through arctic or electronic isolation, and this is a metaphor that can easily be applied to all of mankind. If, given the increasing mechanization of civilization, we continue to turn away from nature and our true natures, then we are simply contributing to the decline of the planet and of the race. Like William and Julia, we should instead be actively searching for solutions, however unpalatable they might turn out to be.

And asking and answering such questions is what good sf, not to mention good literature, is all about.

James Lovegrove

It used to be said, so often that it became a cliché, that science fiction is a literature of ideas. It is no longer said so frequently because it is no longer true. Ever since Kingsley Amis tried to unpack the notion in *New Maps of Hell* by discussing the way in which science fiction stories could employ an "idea as hero" there has been a very marked evolution away from that kind of narrative strategy. The call went out for science fiction stories to be respectable in terms of the same criteria that were applied to other kinds of stories; the modern cliché insists that all stories have to be "character-driven" if they are to be taken seriously as worthy exercises in literary prose. With the possible exception of *Analog*, which has particular hang-ups of its own, all science-fiction markets are nowadays controlled by gatekeepers who have this dictum in mind – none more so than the British *New Worlds*, which was an innovative force within the genre in the days when the old flag still flew but is in its most recent incarnation a perfect mirror of the now-prevailing orthodoxy.

The principal effect of the new orthodoxy has been to encourage the rapid proliferation of a kind of science fiction which is really magical fantasy in fancy dress, where miracles are supported by pseudo-scientific jargon. The kind of sf which tried to take its speculative motifs seriously, continually tinkering with them in the hope of keeping them faithful to the ever-changing spectrum of scientific discovery, became a mere sub-genre, and even within that sub-genre writers became much more preoccupied with the business of "characterization." Robert J. Sawyer's *End of an Era* (NEL, £4.99) provides an excellent example of this kind of modification.

At heart, *End of an Era* is a novel of ideas in which two men using an experimental time-machine drop in on the age of the dinosaurs just before

A Literature of Ideas

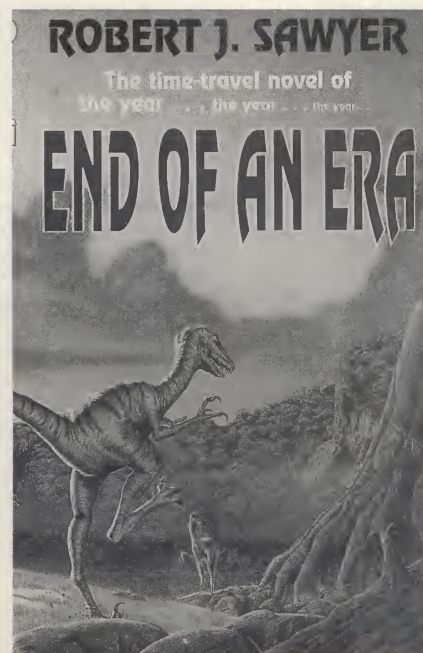
Brian Stableford

the great extinction which wiped them all out. Sawyer is anxious to provide us with an image of that era which takes aboard recent discoveries about the range and nature of dinosaur species, and he is just as anxious to get to grips with a whole series of enigmas around which contemporary theorists have built a complex web of conjecture. Were the dinosaurs warm-blooded? Could pterosaurs really fly? How were dinosaurs able to be so much bigger than the largest contemporary land animals? Were they really killed off by a meteor-strike? Sawyer's answers to all these questions are fanciful – perhaps even

preposterous – but they do make every attempt to fit the data, and in so doing they are responsible to a sense of aesthetics which has nothing to do with characterization. Sawyer is also anxious to take care of the paradoxical consequences which seem to stem from the notion of time travel, and actually refers in his text to Ray Bradbury's "A Sound of Thunder" by way of dramatizing the issues concerned. Like many others before him, he uses the interplay of past and future to recomplicate his plot, and although he is content in the end simply to fudge the question of how the final plot-knot gets tied he is at least prepared to make sure that the job is done neatly. He also makes sure that it has a couple of hidden consequences which he can work into the hectic flurry of punchlines which concludes the story.

The influence of the new orthodoxy on Sawyer's story lies in providing the hero with an unanswered moral dilemma regarding his responsibility to his dying father and importing a tortuous degree of tension between himself and his companion, on account of the fact that his ex-wife is now living with the said companion. This is very cleverly done – but I do mean cleverly rather than well, because Sawyer weaves this subplot into the main plot in such a way that it becomes one more set of problems to be worked out by hypothesis and counter-hypothesis, experiment and proof... and, eventually, one more twist of the knot-tying miracle. Whether this kind of move will really help to make the idea-driven plot more acceptable to readers whose notions of literary propriety have been shaped by orthodox critics I don't know, but I doubt it. On the other hand, it probably will serve to increase the impression the novel makes on sf purists whose pleasure derives from the aesthetic interplay of data, conjecture and conclusion.

Brian Stableford



Books Received

March 1995

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the period specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Anderson, Kevin J., and Doug Beason. **III Wind**. "A novel of biotechnology—and disaster." Tor/Forge, ISBN 0-312-85760-8, 383pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; although the authors have a genre background, and although the book is apparently pure sf, this one is being presented as a thriller for the mainstream audience.) *June 1995.*

Anthony, Patricia. **Cold Allies**. New English Library, ISBN 0-340-61842-6, 298pp, A-format paperback, cover by Peter Elson, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1993; a debut novel by a new American writer [a discovery of *Aboriginal SF*] who already has several more novels out in the States; it's worth adding that the NEL sf paperback list is looking really lively in recent months [see also titles by Dunn, Sawyer, etc., below], with interesting new writers nicely presented and packaged; this is probably the good influence of editor Nick Austin, ex-HarperCollins, working its way through to produce a list which somewhat resembles the old Granada/Grafton one that he ran so well for so many years.) *20th April 1995.*

Ashley, Mike. **The Work of William F. Temple: An Annotated Bibliography & Guide**. "Bibliographies of Modern Authors, No. 28." Borgo Press, ISBN 0-8095-1507-5, 112pp, small-press paperback, \$15. (Bibliography of the British sf writer who died in 1989; first edition; as with all Mike Ashley's projects, it's expertly done.) *Late entry: 1994 publication, received in March 1995.*

Bailey, Robin. **The Palace of Souls: Volume III in the Brothers of the Dragon Series**. New English Library, ISBN 0-450-55673-5, 279pp, A-format paperback, cover by Chris Achilleos, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1995; it's copyright Byron Preiss Visual Publications, Inc.) *20th April 1995.*

Banks, Iain M. **Feersum Endjinn**. Bantam, ISBN 0-553-37459-1, 311pp, C-format paperback, \$12.95. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1994; proof copy received; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 86.) *July 1995.*

Barnes, John. **Kaleidoscope Century**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85561-3, 252pp, hardcover, \$21.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; latest by the award-nominated author of *A Million Open Doors* and *Mother of Storms*.) *June 1995.*

Bear, Greg, with Martin H. Greenberg, eds. **New Legends**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85930-9, 381pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Sf anthology, first published in the UK [?], 1995; proof copy received; a smashing anthology of all-new material by Poul Anderson, Gregory Benford, Greg Egan, Geoffrey A. Landis, Ursula Le Guin, Paul J. McAuley, Robert Silverberg and others; goodness knows what has happened to the British edition, which originally was announced by Legend Books for late 1994 but seems to have been delayed [it probably will be out before this American edition, however, as we understand the book was originated in the UK].) *August 1995.*

Bova, Ben. **Orion Among the Stars**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85637-7, 320pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Sf/fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; fourth in the "Orion" series.) *August 1995.*

Brooks, Terry. **Witches' Brew: A Magic Kingdom of Landover Novel**. Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-38701-5, 304pp, hardcover, cover by Keith Parkinson, \$22. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) *17th April 1995.*

Carroll, Jonathan. **The Panic Hand**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-224540-X, 240pp, hardcover, cover by Ray Richardson, £14.99. (Horror/fantasy collection, first published in Germany [with fewer stories] as *Die Panische Hand*, 1989; the title story was originally published in English in *Interzone*, though that fact has been missed from the otherwise detailed credits [drat!]; mighty strange tales, recommended.) *10th April 1995.*

Charnas, Suzy McKee. **The Furies**. Women's Press, ISBN 0-7043-4422-X, 383pp, B-format paperback, cover by Bobbie Russon, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1994; a long-delayed sequel to *Walk to the End of the World and Motherlines*.) *20th April 1995.*

Charnas, Suzy McKee. **Walk to the End of the World, and Motherlines**. Women's Press, ISBN 0-7043-4154-9, 436pp, B-format paperback, cover by Bobbie Russon, £7.99. (Sf omnibus, first published in 1989; the two constituent novels were first published in the USA, 1974 and 1978.) *20th April 1995.*

Cole, Allan, and Chris Bunch. **Kingdoms of the Night**. Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-38731-7, 482pp, hardcover, cover by Gnome, \$23. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; third in what is now being referred to as the "Anteros" series, following *The Far Kingdoms* and *The Warrior's Tale*.) *June 1995.*

De Haven, Tom. **The Last Human: Chronicles of the King's Tramp, Book 3**. Roc, ISBN 0-14-014956-2, 276pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1992; gosh, Roc have been a long time publishing this: they did volume one of the trilogy in 1991, but whatever happened to volume two, *The End-of-Everything Man?* — Roc seem to have published it some time in the past two or three years, but we never received it or saw it.) *March 1995?*

Donnelly, Joe. **Havock Junction**. Century, ISBN 0-

7126-5871-8, 464pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Horror novel, first edition.) *16th March 1995.*

Dunn, J. R. **This Side of Judgment**. New English Library, ISBN 0-340-63226-7, 322pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Crisp, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1994; the title's fourth word is spelled "Judgement" on the cover, but not on the title page — and we follow the library cataloguer's rule of taking the title page as gospel; a first novel by a new American writer [male] who has contributed stories to *Asimov's*, *Omnibus*, etc; it looks interesting.) *20th April 1995.*

Dwiggins, Toni. **Interrupt**. "Cyber-terrorism!" Tor, ISBN 0-812-52037-8, 319pp, A-format paperback, \$4.99. (Mystery/technothriller, first published in the USA, 1993; a debut novel by an American writer.) *March 1995.*

Egan, Greg. **Permutation City**. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-218-5, 310pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1994; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 86; this is one of the best sf novels of recent years but, oh dear, what a drab cover the publishers have put on it: don't let the cover put you off — it's a must read; Egan's first short-story collection, *Axiomatic*, is due out in hardcover from the same publisher at about the same time but unfortunately *Interzone* has not received a review copy [even though we originally published half its contents]; still, regular readers scarcely need telling that it's likely to be a brilliant collection.) *3rd April 1995.*

Gardner, Craig Shaw. **Dragon Walking: The Dragon Circle, Book Two**. Heinemann, ISBN 0-434-00248-8, 346pp, C-format paperback, cover by Josh Kirby, £8.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 1995.) *10th April 1995.*

Gardner, Craig Shaw. **Raven Walking: The Dragon Circle, Book One**. Mandarin, ISBN 0-7493-1746-9, 412pp, A-format paperback, cover by

Josh Kirby, £5.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 1994.) *10th April 1995.*

Gilliam, Richard, Martin H. Greenberg and Edward E. Kramer, eds. **Grails: Quests of the Dawn**. Roc, ISBN 0-451-45303-4, 387pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Fantasy anthology, first published in the USA, 1994; it seems to be extracted from an earlier, larger book entitled *Grails: Quests, Visitations and Other Occurrences* [Unnameable Press, 1992]; it contains stories by Marion Zimmer Bradley, Orson Scott Card, Mercedes Lackey, Andre Norton and others; this is the American Roc printing of March 1994 with a British price sticker.) *March 1995?*

Griffith, Nicola. **Slow River**. Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-39165-9, 343pp, hardcover, \$18. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a second novel by the Lambda and Tiptree award-winning author whose early stories appeared in *Interzone*.) *August 1995.*

Harbottle, Philip, and Stephen Holland. **British Science Fiction Paperbacks and Magazines, 1949-1956: An Annotated Bibliography and Guide**. "Borgo Literary Guides, No. 7." Borgo Press, ISBN 0-89370-921-2, 232pp, small-press paperback, \$20. (Biographically-arranged annotated bibliography of 1950s downmarket sf writers; first edition; this is a companion book to the same authors' *Vultures of the Void: A History of British SF Publishing, 1946-1956* [1982], but in fact it's a much more substantial and satisfying piece of "pulp scholarship" than the previous volume [which was rather poorly arranged and anecdotal]; highly recommended to all collectors and bibliographical completists.) *Late entry: December (?) 1994 publication, received in March 1995.*

Harding, Simon. **Changeling Hearts**. Pan, ISBN 0-330-33211-2, 406pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; a second novel by this British author whose, *Streamskelter*, received some praise.) *7th July 1995.*

Hewett, Jerry, and Daryl F. Mallett. **The Work of Jack Vance: An Annotated Bibliography & Guide**.

"Bibliographies of Modern Authors, No. 29." Introduction by Robert Silverberg. Borgo Press, ISBN 0-8095-1509-1, xxii+293pp, small-press paperback, \$25. (Bibliography of a major American sf/fantasy author; first edition; this is a much larger and handsomer volume than any we've seen previously from Borgo, perhaps because the high-quality small-press firm of Underwood-Miller have also had a hand in its publication [though exactly what form their involvement takes is not made clear: possibly they have done a simultaneous slipcased collector's edition which is hinted at on the reverse of the title page]; no doubt it will go down very well with Vance fanatics, who seem to be legion.) *Late entry: 1994 publication, received in March 1995.*

Hobb, Robin. **The Assassin's Apprentice: The Farseer I**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-224606-6, 375pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1995; proof copy received; this UK proof carries an endorsement by Jane Johnson, Editorial Director at HarperCollins: "the finest new fantasy I have read and bought in years"; it does look to be well-written, in a reflective, moody way.) *August 1995.*

Hoffman, Nina Kiriki. **The Thread That Binds the Bones**. "Winner of the Bram Stoker Award." Raven, ISBN 1-85487-346-6, 311pp, A-format paperback, cover by Una Fricker, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1993.) *18th April 1995.*

Hogan, James P. **The Immortality Option**. "Sequel to *Code of the Lifemaker*." Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-37915-2, 323pp, hardcover, cover by John Berkey, \$21. (Sf novel, first edition.) *Late entry: 28th February publication, received in March 1995.*

Holland, Steve. **An Index to Mellifont Press: A Working Bibliography**. "Galactic Central Publisher Checklists, Volume 2." Galactic Central Publications [25A Copgrove Rd., Leeds LS8 2SP], ISBN 1-871133-43-2, 76pp, paperback, £4. (Paperback bibliography, first edition; Mellifont Press was a Dublin-based downmarket publishing house, producing books from 1931 to the 1960s; they published little in the way of sf

or fantasy, but Phil Stephensen-Payne has seen fit to release this checklist in his series of bibliographies which is otherwise devoted to sf, so we are listing it here; for those interested in the byways of yesteryear's pulp publishing it's yet another useful item from the indefatigable Mr Holland [see his other recent book listed under Philip Harbottle, above].) *No date shown: received in March 1995.*

Hutson, Shaun. **Lucy's Child**. Little, Brown, ISBN 0-316-90799-5, 372pp, hardcover, cover by Mark Taylor, £15.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first edition.) *6th April 1995.*

Hutson, Shaun. **White Ghost**. Warner, ISBN 0-7515-0768-7, 346pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mark Taylor, £5.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in 1994.) *6th April 1995.*

Jones, Gwyneth. **Flowerdust**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85894-9, 288pp, hardcover, \$21.95. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1993; proof copy received; this is Jones's follow-up to her first novel, *Divine Endurance*; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 83.) *July 1995.*

Joyce, Graham. **Requiem**. Signet/Creed, ISBN 045-1-184343, 305pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first edition [?]; proof copy received; it states "first published by Michael Joseph, 1995" inside, which may indicate that there's a separate hardcover edition, though we have no further information; Signet, Michael Joseph and the new "Creed" line [edited by one Luigi Bonomi, who is also, we are told, in charge of the UK "Roc" list] are all imprints of Penguin Books.) *4th May 1995.*

Kadrey, Richard. **Kamikaze L'Amour**. St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-13100-3, 228pp, hardcover, \$20.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; it has taken Kadrey a long time to produce a second novel [his first was *Metrophage*, 1988], but it looks as though it may have been worth the wait.) *June 1995.*

Lee, Gentry. **Bright Messengers**. Foreword by Arthur C. Clarke. Bantam, ISBN 0-553-09006-2, x+354pp, hardcover, \$21.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; Lee's first solo novel.) *June 1995.*

Lee, John. **The Unicorn War**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85913-9, 351pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; fifth and last volume in the saga which began with *The Unicorn Quest*, 1986.) *July 1995.*

Lee, Tanith. **Darkness, I**. Warner, ISBN 0-7515-1219-2, 408pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in 1994; reviewed by Irfan Shah in *Interzone* 92.) *6th April 1995.*

Lee, Tanith. **Vivia**. Little, Brown, ISBN 0-316-91260-3, 395pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first edition.) *6th April 1995.*

Lisboa, Eugenio, and Helder Macedo, eds. **The Dedalus Book of Portuguese Fantasy**. Translated by Margaret Jull Costa. Dedalus, ISBN 1-873982-66-6, 291pp, B-format paperback, cover by Jorge Garizo do Carmo, £8.99. (Fantasy anthology, first edition; authors represented include Eca de Queiroz [1845-1900], Mario de Sa-Carneiro [1890-1916] and Jose Regio [1901-1969], among many others; most of the stories are translated into English for the first time; this follows on from *The Dedalus Book of Austrian Fantasy*, *The Dedalus Book of Dutch Fantasy*, etc., all produced with the assistance of various European grants; O Brave New World that has such publishers in it!) *30th March 1995.*

McMullen, Sean. **Mirrorsun Rising: Book Two of Greatwinter**. Aphelion [PO Box 619, North Adelaide, S.A. 5006, Australia], ISBN 1-875346-14-7, B-format paperback, cover by Grant Gittus, A\$14.95 [£10 USA; £5 UK]. (Sf novel, first edition; sequel to *Voices in the Light*, which was reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 90; it's available in Britain via the Unlimited Dream Company; see our Small Ads.) *No date shown: received in March 1995.*

Mann, Phillip. **Stand Alone Stan: A Land Fit for Heroes, Vol. 2**. Gollancz/VGSF, ISBN 0-575-05932-X, 288pp, A-format paperback, cover by Adrian Chesterman, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1994.) *30th March 1995.*

Marsh, Chris. **The Completion**. BackWater Publishing [4 Brynford Close, Woking, Surrey GU21 4DW],

ISBN 0-9525289-0-8, 281pp, small-press paperback, cover by Felicity Marsh, £6. (Sf novel, first edition; apparently a self-published debut novel by a British woman writer: "a journey through the entire future of humankind," inspired by the theories of Rupert Sheldrake.) *No date shown: received in March 1995.*

May, Julian. **Diamond Mask: Book Two of The Galactic Milieu Trilogy.** Pan, ISBN 0-330-32299-0, 460pp, A-format paperback, cover by Stephen Bradbury, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1994; there seems to have been a HarperCollins hardcover edition in Britain last year, but we never received it.) *7th April 1995.*

Meyrink, Gustav. **The Golem.** Translated by Mike Mitchell. Introduction by Robert Irwin. Dedalus, ISBN 1-873982-91-7, 304pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in Germany, 1915; this is a wholly new translation of the classic Austrian fantasy; the previous English translation, published by Dedalus in 1985 and reprinted by them several times since, dated from 1928 and is presumably considered inferior.) *23rd March 1995.*

Norton, Andre, and Mercedes Lackey. **Elvenblood: An Epic High Fantasy, Book Two of the Halfblood Chronicles.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85548-6, 350pp, hardcover, cover by Boris Vallejo, \$22.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; the first volume, *The Elvenbane*, appeared in 1991; that lengthy gap, together with the fact that no packager's name is involved, encourages to believe that this is a genuine collaboration and not a sharecrop.) *June 1995.*

O'Brien, Phil. **Memories of the Irish Israeli War.** New Futurist Books [72 New Bond St., London W1Y 9DD], ISBN 1-899690-00-X, 263pp, C-format paperback, £7.99. (Satirical sf novel, first edition; a debut novel from a new publishing house, described as "avant-garde," which "specializes in writing whose metaphors confront the scientific and technological fabric of modern life, without being science fiction" [which, of course, is just a way of saying that it is science fiction]; the author is a female [Philomena?] popster and playwright who hails from Northwight in Ireland; her book

sounds at times like Ballard's *The Drowned World* rewritten with a touch of the blarney: "Seaweed and black dulce clung to the streets of London, blue mussels, salt worn coke tins, bits of bottle worn semi-precious, riot barriers of sea-contoured wood, the luscious drab trash of the banished sea..."; worth a look.) *7th May 1995.*

Ore, Rebecca. **Gaia's Toys.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85781-0, 317pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; "a wild, cautionary, cyberpunk fable from one of SF's hottest talents.") *August 1995.*

Park, Paul. **Celestis.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85899-X, 288pp, hardcover, \$21.95. (Sf novel, first published in the UK as *Coelestis*, 1993; proof copy received; reviewed, ravingly, by John Clute in *Interzone* 77.) *June 1995.*

Pollack, Rachel. **Temporary Agency.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-267-4, 202pp, A-format paperback, cover by David O'Connor, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1994.) *6th April 1995.*

Pratchett, Terry. **Soul Music.** "A Discworld Novel." Corgi, ISBN 0-552-14029-5, 378pp, A-format paperback, cover by Josh Kirby, £4.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in 1994.) *10th November 1994.*

Preston, Douglas, and Lincoln Child. **Relic.** "Alien meets Jurassic Park in New York City." Tor/Forge, ISBN 0-312-85630-X, 382pp, hardcover, cover by Jim Thiesen, \$22.95. (Sf/horror novel, first edition; it's a thriller about a dreadful thing, discovered during a South American archaeological dig and now on the loose in a big-city museum; the book has already been optioned as a movie by Kennedy-Marshall Productions; principal author Preston is a former museum curator who has previously written non-fiction books as well as a novel called *Jennie*.) *Late entry: February publication, received in March 1995.*

Rankin, Robert. **The Greatest Show Off Earth.** Corgi, ISBN 0-552-13924-6, 318pp, A-format paperback, cover by Ian Murray, £4.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in 1994; sequel to *The Book of Ultimate Truths and Raiders of the Lost Car Park*.) *6th April 1995.*

Rankin, Robert. **The Most Amazing Man Who Ever Lived.** Doubleday, ISBN 0-385-40514-6, 267pp, hardcover, cover by Ian Murray, £14.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition.) *6th April 1995.*

Regis, Ed. **Nano!** "Remaking the world atom by atom." Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-02786-8, 307pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Popular science text, first published in the USA, 1995; an engagingly written, state-of-the-art book about one of the ultimate science-fiction dreams — nanotechnology, or microscopic self-replicating machines.) *9th March 1995.*

Reichert, Mickey Zucker. **The Western Wizard.** "Book 2 of *The Last of the Renshai*." Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-148-0, x+502pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1992; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in *Interzone* 80.) *3rd April 1995.*

Robinson, Kim Stanley. **The Gold Coast.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-648020-9, 389pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1988; second in the loose "Orange County" trilogy; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 32.) *10th April 1995.*

Robinson, Kim Stanley. **Three Californias.** Tor/Orb, ISBNs various, 375, 389 and 326pp, trade paperbacks, \$13.95 each. (Sf omnibus, first edition — or so we thought at first, then we noticed that it states in small print on the back: "this special omnibus bound galley has been produced for your reviewing convenience — Orb will publish the books in three separate volumes"; presumably, that means that this bound proof with the new overall title will itself become a rare collectable item; the three novels in question are, of course, the "Orange County" trilogy comprising *The Wild Shore* [1984], *The Gold Coast* [1988] and *Pacific Edge* [1990].) *May-June 1995.*

Russell, William Moy. **The Barber of Aldebaran.** Janus [19 Nassau St., London W1N 7RE], ISBN 1-85756-129-5, 190pp, small-press paperback, £7.95. (Humorous sf novel; first edition; the author is a British biologist, and this novel was written 40 years ago but

has not seen print until now.) *30th March 1995.*

Sawyer, Robert J. **Fossil Hunter: The Quintaglio Ascension, 2.** New English Library, ISBN 0-340-61803-5, 290pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mick Posen, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1993; it's the third novel by this Canadian author to be published in the UK in recent months; has everyone noticed how both Australian and Canadian sf seem to be busting out all over, just lately?; we have Egan and McMullen and others from down under, plus Sawyer, Vonarburg and others from the far north; for more about Canadian sf, see McAuley's and Stableford's reviews in this issue of *IZ*.) *20th April 1995.*

Scott, Melissa. **Shadow Man.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85800-0, 320pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; the blurb calls it "the best sf novel of sexual identity since Samuel R. Delany's *Triton*.".) *July 1995.*

Shippey, Tom, ed. **The Oxford Book of Fantasy Stories.** Oxford University Press, ISBN 0-19-282398-1, xxii+499pp, B-format paperback, cover by Pete Lyon, £7.99. (Fantasy anthology, first published in 1994; contains chronologically arranged tales by Richard Garnett, Lord Dunsany, A. Merritt, H. P. Lovecraft, John Buchan, Robert E. Howard, Clark Ashton Smith, C. L. Moore, Fritz Leiber, Ray Bradbury, Henry Kuttner, Jack Vance and most of the other English-language names one might expect, ending with Tanith Lee, Lucius Shepard, Robert Holdstock and Terry Pratchett; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 80.) *9th March 1995.*

Slade, Michael. **Ripper.** New English Library, ISBN 0-340-61779-9, 377pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA [?], 1994; "Michael Slade" is a pseudonym for a pair of Canadian lawyers.) *10th April 1995.*

Sullivan, Tricia. **Lethe.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06036-0, 384pp, hardcover, cover by Larry Rostant, £16.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA [?], 1995; the debut novel of a new American writer, born 1968.) *29th June 1995.*

Warren, Alan. **Roald Dahl: From The Gremlins To The**

Chocolate Factory. 2nd edition. "The Milford Series, Popular Writers of Today, Volume Fifty-Seven." Borgo Press, ISBN 0-8095-3001-5, 128pp, small-press paperback, \$15. (Critical study of the bestselling British horror-story writer and children's fantasist who died in 1990; the first edition was published in 1988 by Starmont House; this one is described as "revised and expanded.") *Late entry: 1994 publication, received in March 1995.*

Wells, Martha. **City of Bones.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85686-5, 383pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; described as "Scheherazade meets Dumas, a wondrous Arabian Nights fantasy"; a second novel

by the author of *Element of Fire*.) *June 1995.*

Wilder, Cherry. **Dealers in Light and Darkness.** Edgewood Press [PO Box 380264, Cambridge, MA 02238, USA], ISBN 0-9629066-4-6, 166pp, small-press paperback, cover by Nick Stathopoulos, \$9. (Sf collection, first edition; the back cover comes laden with commendations from people like Suzy McKee Charnas, Maureen F. McHugh and Ian Watson; two of these nine stories, "Something Coming Through" and "Looking Forward to the Harvest," were first published by *Interzone*; recommended.) *No Date shown: received in March 1995.*

Wilhelm, Kate. **A Flush of Shadows.** St Martin's Press,

ISBN 0-312-13075-9, 336pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Crime/fantasy collection, first edition; proof copy received; it contains five long stories, two of them previously unpublished, in Wilhelm's "Constance Leidl and Charlie Meiklejohn" series; the publishers, no doubt hopefully, quote a critic who says, "what an absolutely superb TV series... the Charlie and Constance forays would make"; the fly in the ointment is that there already is a successful TV series about a man and a woman who investigate the paranormal — it's called *The X-Files*.) *June 1995.*

Wolfe, Gene. **Peace.** Tor/Orb, ISBN 0-312-89033-8, 264pp, trade paperback, \$12.95. (Fantasy novel, first

published in 1975; proof copy received.) *July 1995.*

Wright, T. M. **Sleepeasy.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05918-4, 251pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Read, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1993.) *30th March 1995.*

Young, Jim. **Armed Memory.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85766-7, 256pp, hardcover, \$21.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; described as "a cutting-edge novel of bioengineering, body modification, and high-level tension"; this is a second novel by an American author, James Maxwell Young [born 1951; resident in London, U.S. Embassy staff], whose first, *The Face of the Deep*, came out 16 years ago, in 1979.) *June 1995.*

SPINOFFERY

This is a list of all books received that fall into those sub-types of sf, fantasy and horror which may be termed novelizations, recursive fictions, spinoffs, sequels by other hands, shared worlds and sharecrops (including non-fiction about shared worlds, films and TV, etc.). The collective term "Spinoffery" is used for the sake of brevity.

Hambly, Barbara. **Children of the Jedi.** "Star Wars." Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-03764-2, 345pp, hardcover, £10.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1995; reviewed by Brain Stableford in *Interzone* 95.) *11th May 1995.*

Jordan, Robert. **The Conan Chronicles.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85929-5, 510pp, hardcover, \$19.95. (Sequel-by-another-hand fantasy omnibus, first edition; proof copy received; the three Robert E. Howard pastiches which make up the volume, *Conan the Invincible*, *Conan the Defender* and *Conan the Unconquered*, were first published in 1982-1983; "nobody alive writes Conan better than Robert Jordan," says L. Sprague de Camp on the cover, and he's probably right; "Jordan" is a pseudonym of James O. Rigney, Jr.) *July 1995.*

Leonard, Paul. **Dancing the Code.** "Doctor Who: The Missing Adventures." Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-426-20441-7, 279pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Campbell, £4.99. (Sf television-

series spinoff novel, first edition.) *20th April 1995.*

McCaffrey, Anne, and S. M. Stirling. **The City Who Fought.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-261-5, 436pp, hardcover, cover by Mark Harrison, £16.99. (Sf "sharecrop" novel, first published in the USA, 1993; one of a series based on McCaffrey's *The Ship Who Sang*, it's copyright "Bill Fawcett & Associates"; previous titles include *PartnerShip* by McCaffrey and Margaret Ball, and *The Ship Who Searched* by McCaffrey and Mercedes Lackey; Anne McCaffrey probably had little to do with the actual writing of any of them.) *2nd March 1995.*

McCandless, David. **Trekmaster.** "Trek Trivia Quiz." Boxtree, ISBN 0-7522-0814-4, 189pp, B-format paperback, £4.99. (Quiz book tied to the sf TV series *Star Trek* and its spinoffs; first edition.) *2nd March 1995.*

McIntee, David. **Sanctuary.** "The New Doctor Who Adventures." Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-426-20439-5, 297pp, A-format paperback, cover by Peter Elson, £4.99. (Sf television-series spinoff novel, first edition.) *20th April 1995.*

O'Neil, Dennis. **Batman: Knightfall.** Bantam, ISBN 0-553-40970-0, 413pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy comic-book spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1994;

inspired by various comics published by D.C., featuring the Batman hero created by Bob Kane.) *6th April 1995.*

Pringle, David, ed. **Red Thirst.** "Warhammer." Boxtree, ISBN 0-7522-0975-2, ix+226pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Sibbick, £4.99. (Shared-world role-playing-game-inspired fantasy anthology, first published in 1990; contains stories by Steve Baxter, "Brian Craig," Nicola Griffith, Neil Jones, William King and "Jack Yeovil"; this printing differs from the Games Workshop first edition by the addition of a five-page timeline and three pages of maps.) *9th March 1995.*

Pringle, David, ed. **Wolf Riders.** "Warhammer." Boxtree, ISBN 0-7522-0869-1, ix+202pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Bonner, £4.99. (Shared-world role-playing-game-inspired fantasy anthology, first published in 1990; contains stories by "Ralph T. Castle," "Brian Craig," Pete Garratt, William King, "Sandy Mitchell," Simon Ounsley and "Jack Yeovil"; this printing differs from the Games Workshop first edition by the addition of a five-page timeline and three pages of maps.) *9th March 1995.*

Rawolinski, Leah. **Star Wreck 6: Geek Space Nine.** Illustrated by Harry Trumbore. "An unauthorised parody." Boxtree, ISBN 0-7522-0692-3, 136pp, paperback, £3.99. (Sf television-series parody, first published in the USA, 1994; further adventures of Captain James T. Smirk and Mr Smock

aboard the starship *Endocrine*.) *6th April 1995.*

Rawolinski, Leah. **Star Wreck 7: Space, the Fido Frontier.** Illustrated by Harry Trumbore. "An unauthorised parody." Boxtree, ISBN 0-7522-0697-4, 134pp, paperback, £3.99. (Sf television-series parody, first published in the USA, 1994.) *6th April 1995.*

Saberhagen, Fred, ed. **An Armory of Swords.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85414-5, 317pp, hardcover, \$21.95. (Shared-world fantasy anthology, first edition; proof copy received; eight stories set in Saberhagen's world of "Lost Swords"; contributors include Thomas Saberhagen [Fred's son?], Michael A. Stackpole, Robert E. Vardeman, Walter Jon Williams and others.) *June 1995.*

Sky, Kathleen. **Vulcan!** "Star Trek Adventures, 11." Titan, ISBN 1-85286-537-7, 175pp, A-format paperback, cover by Alistair Pearson, £4.50. (Sf television-and-film-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1978.) *6th April 1995.*

Stackpole, Michael A. **Dementia: The Apostle of Insanity Trilogy, Volume Three.** "Mutant Chronicles." Roc, ISBN 0-451-45417-0, 271pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Shared-world sf novel, based on a role-playing game; first published in the USA, 1994; it's copyright "Target Games AB"; this is the American edition with a British price sticker.) *March 1995?*

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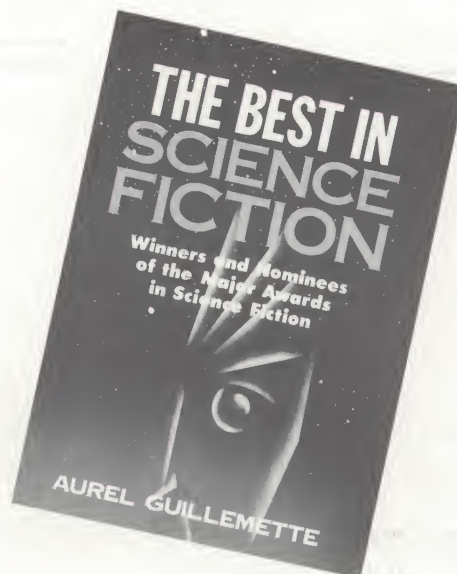
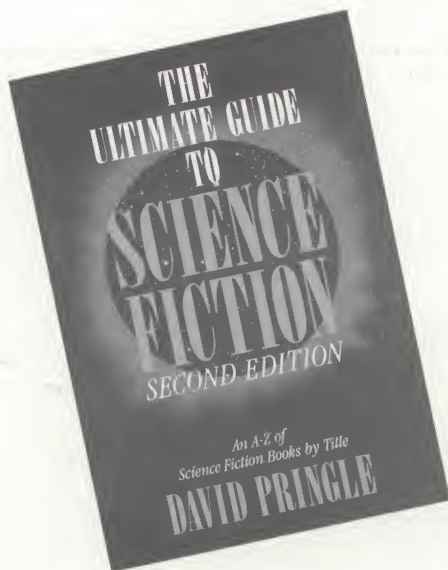
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